

# **A Study of Working Women in Selected Postwar Texts by French Women Writers**

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## **THESIS ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyses the literary representations of working women by the following French women writers: Simone de Beauvoir, Simone Weil, Christiane Rochefort, Gisèle Halimi, Marie Cardinal, Janine Brégeon, Claire Etcherelli, Annie Ernaux, Annie Leclerc, Dorothee Letessier, Michèle Fitoussi and Emmanuèle Bernheim.

A twenty-two page introduction starts from the premise that 'le travail n'est pas une panacée'. The writings are contextualised in relationship to the social, political and economic developments during the postwar period.

In chapter one, 'Politics, Language and Social Realism' there follows an analysis of the importance of the events May 1968 and an examination of the problematic politics of French feminist language. However, the main focus of the chapter is on the social realism of women's lived experience.

In chapter two, 'L'École des femmes', a critical investigation of the female curriculum and career prospects is carried out, while particular attention is paid to Beauvoir's critique of the education of girls during the period. Moreover, the inconsistencies between Beauvoir's memoirs and her fictions are highlighted. Further sections describe the education of French girls in the 1950s at the hands of Catholic teachers who instruct them that 'Maman c'est le plus beau métier'. Gender stereotyping at home and school is examined at length. The upbringing and socialisation of female children is then discussed under the headings 'Parental influence', 'Sex education and taboos' and 'Peer and social pressures'.

Chapter three, 'Housework: the Death of Romance', focuses on the domestic labour debate and propounds the thesis that social class and sexual stratification constitute a double oppression for the 'second sex'. Indeed it is even suggested that housework turns women's cherished interiors, on which they lavish so much misplaced love and attention, into workhouses. The psychological effects of this are shown to be disastrous.

Chapter four, 'O. S. toute sa vie, c'est pas une vie' proceeds from Weil's courageous social experiment, 'Journal d'usine', to the worm's eye view of the factory floor as perceived by the protagonists of Letessier and Etcherelli. The workers' oppression is exacerbated by the sexual harassment to which they are routinely subjected and the deleterious effects of the assembly line on their health. Two final sections on 'Women and trade unions' and 'Shop and office work' complete a pessimistic scenario which shows that the contribution made by female employees is seldom recognised at its true value.

In chapter five, 'Professional women and maternal guilt', two major texts by Marie Cardinal, *Le Passé empiété* and *Les Grands Désordres* are selected in order to foreground the perennial difficulties women face in reconciling work and family.

The conclusion however suggests that some of the most recent sociological and fictional texts mark a definitive progression in women's sexual and professional emancipation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The considerable increase in the number of women-authored texts published in France in the last three decades has been matched by an equally significant increase in women's participation in the workplace. In this study I shall be examining the developing discourses and representations of working women in postwar French women's writing, and situating the novels in the context of the relevant social, political and economic developments in France since 1945. I have opted for texts that depict as diverse a range of working women as possible: from working-class housewives to middle-class homemakers; from factory and office workers to trade union representatives; from teachers, lawyers, doctors, copywriters and psychologists to artists, writers and embroiderers. These texts, of which there are approximately twenty, have been published during the fifty years since the appearance of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949). My chosen writers range chronologically from the Beauvoir/activist generation<sup>1</sup> which includes Christiane Rochefort, Gisèle Halimi, Claire Etcherelli and Janine Brégeon, to Marie Cardinal and Annie Leclerc who produced their most influential texts during the 1970s and 1980s, to the modern generation of writers such as Annie Ernaux, Dorothée Letessier, Michèle Fitoussi and Emmanuèle Bernheim. The selected writings are drawn from various literary genres: fiction (*Les Petits*

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<sup>1</sup>I have adopted Atack and Powrie's system of classification here. See Atack and Powrie, 1990: 1.

*Enfants du siècle*, *Les Stances à Sophie*, *Les Belles Images*, *La Femme rompue*, *A propos de Clémence*, *Le Passé empiété*, *Les Grands Désordres*, *Sa femme*); autobiography (*Le Lait de l'oranger*); *Bildungsroman*<sup>2</sup> (*Elise ou la vraie vie*, *Un arbre voyageur*, *Le Voyage à Paimpol*, *Loïca*); fictionalised autobiography (*Les Mots pour le dire*, *La Femme gelée*, *Passion simple*); journalism (*Le Ras-le-bol des superwomen*); interview/dialogue (*Autrement dit*); journal ('Journal d'usine'), and history/testimony (*La Cause des femmes*). Some texts, for example, Leclerc's lyrical manifesto, *Parole de femme*, do not fit neatly into these definitions and straddle more than one category. Other writers, as we shall see, adapt or subtly exploit conventional genres. At the end of *Une femme*, Ernaux summarises the project as neither a biography nor a novel. She sees her writing as 'peut-être quelque chose entre la littérature, la sociologie et l'histoire' (Ernaux, 1987: 106). Brégeon's anguished soliloquy in *Une journée inutile* is equally difficult to place within standard generic definitions, although, as I shall explain later, it has strong similarities with Beauvoir's 'Monologue'.

The postwar period was an era of radical social change, particularly for women. In the three decades between the end of the Second World War and the early 1970s women in France made their most significant legislative gains. De Gaulle granted women the vote in 1944 and the French Constitution of 1946 recognised the equal rights of men and women in most domains. In the 1960s the misogynous clauses of the Napoleonic Code were reversed, which meant that a woman could open a bank account or take a job without her husband's permission. In the 1970s the repressive laws on contraception and abortion were repealed and employers were forbidden to discriminate against candidates on the basis of their sex.<sup>3</sup> The impact of these events is discernible both in the volume of texts produced by

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<sup>2</sup>See Atack, 1990: 'Elise can be classified as a *Bildungsroman*; our heroine will develop and change and be brought to knowledge by the end of the story' (p. 64). See also Poole, 1994: 71 - 81 and Fallaize, 1993: 91.

Thomas, 1999, argues that '[*La Femme gelée*] has affinities with the feminist *Bildungsroman*, as defined and discussed by Rita Felski, in that it depicts a gradual process of self-awareness, and the development of feminist understanding of her individual experience by the narrator' (p. 10).

<sup>3</sup>See appendix for a summary of the most relevant legislative reforms. The dates of publication of the selected texts are included in the table to emphasise the significance of the historical context. The information in the table is taken from the introduction to *New French Feminisms* by Marks and De Courtivron and from *Quid 1999*.

women writers in the 1970s and 1980s, and in the themes present in their writings. Most of the authors of my selected texts wrote in this climate of increased economic autonomy and greater sexual and reproductive freedom, and offer impressive analyses of women's work inside and outside the home and the dilemmas associated with combining career and family. From Beauvoir's disparagement of the dependent housewife to Leclerc's celebration of motherhood, and from Letessier's graphic portrayal of the assembly line to the details of Halimi's outstanding accomplishments as a lawyer and political activist, my chosen writers highlight the complexities of female employment, and the different attitudes to work within the women's movement.

Even though fifty years have elapsed since the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, in which Beauvoir identified work as the key to women's liberation, the issue of female employment remains an intricate one. On the one hand paid work releases women from their economic dependence and resultant obligation to their male partners, on the other it intensifies their oppression. Gainful employment offers status, financial responsibility, greater autonomy and varying degrees of intellectual stimulus. However, despite the fact that working women are not a recent phenomenon<sup>4</sup> and that in France their participation in the workforce has been increasing steadily since 1968,<sup>5</sup> present-day working conditions and social structures do not adequately reflect the needs of women who go out to work. Women who take up employment suffer discrimination both in the sort of work available to them and in the wages they receive, which in 1997 in France represented less than three quarters<sup>6</sup> of the male wage. Equal rights legislation may have been in place for over twenty years but

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<sup>4</sup>Women were productive within the community long before society became industrialised. Many goods which are now commercially produced were once produced at home by women. Duties carried out within the home ranged from keeping a kitchen-garden, preservation of fruit and vegetables, care of livestock and manufacture of butter and cheese, brewing of beer, spinning of flax and wool, candle-making, preparation of herbal remedies, curing of bacon, baking and dressmaking (See for example Delphy, 1984; Sartin, 1968; Jackson, 1992; Oakley, 1982; Laubier (ed.), 1990; Artinian and Boccara, 1992).

<sup>5</sup>See Laubier (ed.), 1990: 119.

<sup>6</sup>See Frémy, 1999. More recent figures published in *Le Monde*, April 1998, show that men earn on average 22.5 per cent more than women. The same article signalled that the gap between men's and women's salaries, which has decreased by 1.5 per cent each year on average, stopped decreasing in 1997.

women are still second-class citizens in the workplace. Furthermore, their status as working women does not lessen their responsibilities at home and many women find the combination of full-time hours and domestic chores extremely demanding. Improved access to contraception and abortion<sup>7</sup> has given women greater control over their fertility, which has facilitated their entry into the labour market, and recent figures indicate that French working mothers participate in the workplace and maintain continuity of employment to a far greater extent than British women.<sup>8</sup> French social policy and employment legislation have certainly enhanced women's working circumstances. Pregnant women have employment protection and enjoy generous maternity pay schemes. Furthermore, there is an extensive choice of childcare provision for children of school and pre-school age in France and, compared with Britain, a far greater percentage of this care is organised, funded or subsidised by the state.<sup>9</sup> However, despite the adoption of strategies to attenuate the difficulties women face in the workplace, inequalities between men and women still exist. Some women have managed to enter professions that were previously a male preserve, but a considerable number of working women are employed in segregated environments at the lower end of the occupational scale in low-skilled, poorly-remunerated, part-time jobs. Their secondary status is undeniably linked to their subordinate position in other spheres, especially the domestic sphere, where roles still tend to be gender-specific. Beauvoir debunked the mythical notion of femininity in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, yet it is partly because these myths are widely accepted even today that women are assigned or steer themselves towards particular roles in society. As long as this attitude prevails women are likely to remain in occupational ghettos:

Le «beau sexe» représente 100% des effectifs des assistantes maternelles, gardiennes d'enfants, travailleuses familiales, 98% des employés de maison et

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<sup>7</sup>The feminist struggle for voluntary maternity was the most significant campaign of the late 1960s and early 1970s in France. The Loi Neuwirth in 1967 made contraception officially available, although it was not until 1974 that women were reimbursed the cost of their contraceptives by the French social security system. In 1975 the Loi Simone Veil made abortion legal in France. This was followed in 1982 by the Loi Roudy which made it possible for abortion costs to be claimed back.

<sup>8</sup>See Dex, Walters and Alden, 1993 and Laubier (ed.), 1990: 113.

<sup>9</sup>See Dex, Walters and Alden, 1993: 41-45, 71-74.

femmes de ménage, des secrétaires, dactylos et sténo-dactylos, 92% des aides soignantes, infirmières, ouvriers non qualifiés de confection, et des agents de service des établissements d'enseignement, 81% des agents de services hospitaliers, 78% des employés des services comptables et financiers, 77% des instituteurs, 76% des agents de bureau de la fonction publique, 75% des employés administratifs, 74% des employés de nettoyage. (Artinian and Boccara, 1992: 29)

So although women are very gradually infiltrating more and more male-dominated professions, they are still more likely to be working in areas where there is little opportunity to use their initiative, make decisions or acquire responsibility, and they are also more likely to shoulder the burden of childcare and domestic duties when they arrive home from work.

## LE TRAVAIL N'EST PAS UNE PANACÉE

For several decades now, feminist theorists and women writers have grappled with the paradox that work outside the home both liberates women and aggravates their situation. Beauvoir recognised at the time of writing *Le Deuxième Sexe* that the question of female labour was problematic,<sup>10</sup> and over twenty years later in an interview with Alice Schwarzer, she was forced to concede that there was still no straightforward resolution to the problem. While she believed work was the only way women could achieve economic freedom, the sort of work she had in mind was clearly not accessible to the majority of women:

Je sais très bien que le travail, tel qu'il est aujourd'hui, a un côté libérateur mais aussi un côté aliénant. Et que, par conséquent, les femmes ont souvent à choisir

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<sup>10</sup>See Beauvoir, 1949: 598. At this stage, however, Beauvoir believed that socialism held the answers: 'Cependant il ne faudrait pas croire que la simple juxtaposition du droit de vote et d'un métier soit une parfaite libération: le travail aujourd'hui n'est pas la liberté. C'est seulement dans un monde socialiste que la femme en accédant à l'un s'assurerait l'autre'. She later re-evaluated this position.

entre deux aliénations: celle de la ménagère ou celle du travail à l'usine. Le travail n'est pas une panacée mais il est quand même la première condition de l'indépendance. (Schwarzer, 1984: 44-45)

Not all of my chosen authors write about working conditions from a feminist perspective. Simone Weil was a passionate supporter of the working classes, and her sensitivity to the suffering of others was apparent from an early age. As a small child during the First World War she sent rations of chocolate to a soldier at the Front. At ten years old she declared herself a Bolshevik, having been inspired by the Russian Revolution. Born in Paris in 1909 to affluent and well-educated Jewish parents, Weil's short life was characterised by militant activity, and included a period in the anarchist militia during the Spanish Civil War. Because she was only thirty-four years old when she died in 1943, her writing predates the texts of the Beauvoir generation of writers, although she was only a year younger than Beauvoir and was her classmate at the *Sorbonne* when they were preparing for entry to the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. Weil studied under Alain, the most famous philosophy teacher of the Third Republic at the prestigious *Lycée Henri IV*, and then at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* where she successfully achieved her *agrégation*. Having become interested in revolutionary politics while at school, Weil decided that the only way to truly understand the proletarian condition was to experience it at first hand, and so she abandoned her teaching career to immerse herself in factory work. Her 'Journal d'usine' is a penetrating and unsentimental account of her time spent as a manual worker between 1934 and 1935. Published posthumously in 1951 as part of a larger work, *La Condition ouvrière*, Weil's journal chronicles the brutalising tasks she is required to carry out and exposes the alienating nature of industrial work. The economical style of her diary entries reveals a great deal about Weil's state of mind at the time. Her condensed notes are symptomatic of her mental exhaustion and show how the oppressive circumstances in the factory diminish her capacity for measured reflection: 'L'épuisement finit par me faire oublier les raisons

véritables de mon séjour en usine, rend presque invincible pour moi la tentation la plus forte que comporte cette vie: celle de ne plus penser, seul et unique moyen de ne pas en souffrir' (Weil, 1951: 51). This is a leitmotif in accounts of oppression. Repressing thought as a means of self-preservation is a strategy employed by other heroines. The opening lines of Etcherelli's *Elise ou la vraie vie* begin with the factory worker Elise attempting to shut out painful memories: 'Surtout ne pas penser. Comme on dit «Surtout ne pas bouger» à un blessé aux membres brisés. Ne pas penser. Repousser les images' (Etcherelli, 1967: 9). Similarly, Letessier's heroine, Loïca, tries to subdue her feelings when she is obliged to curtail her studies: 'Il ne faut penser à rien' (Letessier, 1983: 42). The prosaic and fragmented structure of Weil's journal with its repeated litany of aches and pains mirror the demands placed on workers in the factory: to perform trivial tasks at high speed without thinking and without an understanding of how their actions influence the final product. Weil's year in the factory did sharpen her insights into workers' oppression, the factory hierarchy and the manufacturing process, and drawing from this experience she made suggestions for reforms in working conditions, many of which have been reiterated by modern sociologists. However, the harshest lesson learned from her factory experience, something she had not anticipated before entering the factory, is that oppression does not engender revolt; it encourages complete submission.

Similarly, Beauvoir (1908 - 1986) could not have anticipated that the emancipation of women was further off than she had predicted in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. The introduction to Beauvoir's most famous work may bring a wry smile to the reader's lips: 'J'ai longtemps hésité à écrire un livre sur la femme. Le sujet est irritant, surtout pour les femmes; et il n'est pas neuf. La querelle du féminisme a fait couler assez d'encre, à présent elle est à peu près close' (Beauvoir, 1949, vol. I: 11). When *Le Deuxième Sexe* was published Beauvoir did not consider herself a feminist. Her involvement with the women's movement did not begin until the end of 1970 when she was asked by members of the *Mouvement de Libération des*

*Femmes* to sign the *Manifeste des 343*.<sup>11</sup> Beauvoir's last two fictional works, *Les Belles Images* (1966) and *La Femme rompue* (1968) which precede this feminist activity, were nonetheless written during a time of important civil and legal change for women. In 1965 after the publication of *Une mort très douce* (1964) Beauvoir had decided she no longer wished to write about herself but intended to experiment with different narrative strategies, with themes and characters far removed from her own experience. *Les Belles Images* exposes the superficial and suffocating materialistic world of the technocratic bourgeoisie, and its unhealthy obsession with money and possessions. This is the context in which the heroine, Laurence, a successful advertising executive, suffers another mental breakdown in a history of mental crises. Laurence's malaise within this milieu is brought sharply into focus by Beauvoir's constant switch between the pronouns 'je' and 'elle'/'Laurence', drawing a distinction between Laurence's internal narrative and how she sees herself (and how others see her) from the outside. The technique further emphasises the heroine's ambivalence towards this sector of society and her inability to break away from the cocoon of her comfortable surroundings. Like the heroine of Brégeon's *Une journée inutile*, Laurence's revolt is somewhat half-hearted: 'une jeune femme assez complice de son entourage pour ne pas le juger, assez honnête pour vivre cette connivence dans le malaise' (Beauvoir, 1972: 172). Similarly, in 'Monologue' and 'La Femme rompue', two novellas from the collection *La Femme rompue*, the main characters avoid taking any responsibility for the circumstances in which they find themselves. With a female narrator who recounts events via the intimate, confessional tone of a diary, 'La Femme rompue' subtly mimics the romance novel. However, women who read the serialisation of 'La Femme rompue' in *Elle* did not necessarily heed the warning in the text, that making a vocation out of marriage and motherhood is a trap to be avoided. They identified with the heroine and shared Monique's *mauvaise foi*. As

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<sup>11</sup> The manifesto, designed to alert the media to the campaign for free legal abortion, was published by *Le Nouvel Observateur* in April 1971. Signed by 343 women including Beauvoir and many other literary and celebrity figures — Catherine Deneuve, Marguerite Duras, Françoise Sagan — it stated that they had all had illegal abortions. 'Un million de femmes se font avorter chaque année en France. Elles le font dans des conditions dangereuses en raison de la clandestinité à laquelle elles sont condamnées alors que cette opération, pratiquée sous contrôle médical, est des plus simples. On fait le silence sur ces millions de femmes. « Je déclare que je suis l'une d'elles. Je déclare avoir avorté »' (Tristan and Pisan, 1977: 67). See also Halimi, 1992: 78 and Duchén, 1986: 12.



Fallaize points out in her essay, 'Resisting romance: Simone de Beauvoir, 'The Woman Destroyed' and the romance script', Beauvoir's plan to exploit the conventions of romance fiction backfired. The author's attitude towards women and work pervades all three texts. *Les Belles Images*, 'La Femme rompue' and 'Monologue' all illustrate the pitfalls involved in adopting a submissive role within the family and the psychological problems associated with conforming to societal pressures of what it means to be a wife and mother, with the latter two short stories emphasising more strongly the risks of choosing motherhood and housework over paid work.

Born in 1917, Christiane Rochefort was a contemporary of Beauvoir's and has written steadily for over forty years. An activist in the French women's movement like Beauvoir, Rochefort signed the *Manifeste des 343* and was one of the group of women who in 1970 placed a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier dedicated to the unknown wife of the soldier. The use of irony as a device to voice her disapproval of sexist practices, to undermine dominant ideologies, or to challenge assumptions is arguably one of Rochefort's most engaging characteristics. Her quick-wittedness clearly endeared her to her fellow activists in the movement. Gisèle Halimi recalls the beginnings of the organisation *Choisir* and, in particular, a telephone call to the writer: 'Christiane Rochefort, du fin fond de son printemps breton, acceptait aussi de prendre ses responsabilités. «Tu seras trésorière!» Éclat de rire dans le téléphone: «Mais je n'ai jamais su compter!»' (Halimi, 1992: 81). The two novels I will be focusing on in this study, *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* (1961) and *Les Stances à Sophie* (1963) are wonderful examples of Rochefort's subversive humour, her sardonic brand of realism and her ability to satirise the political and social mood of late 1950s France. Narrated by Josyane, the eldest daughter of a large family, and set in a modern housing development on the outskirts of Paris, *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* is an attack on the socially and sexually oppressive values of the time. The 1940s had seen the introduction of a range of legislative measures which focused on the importance of the family: a generous family allowances system was introduced; *familles nombreuses* were entitled to a reduction

on public transport and to discounts in certain shops; Mother's Day was established. The championship of family values was reinforced by a hardline approach to abortion: in 1943 Marie-Louise Giraud, an abortionist, was condemned to death by guillotine. This domestic policy was a means of exercising social control over women in particular, in that it encouraged them to stay at home and produce children. Through the narrator's blunt observations and derisive comments, Rochefort articulates her criticism of French society, exploiting the perspective of the ostensibly unbiased child narrator to heighten the reader's sense of outrage. Irony is also a central device in *Les Stances à Sophie*, but this time the targets of Rochefort's satire are middle-class conventions, bourgeois marriage and consumerism. The heroine, Céline, is a slightly more enlightened narrator than Josyane. Whereas the latter is pregnant at the end of the novel and effectually ensnared in the same trap as her mother, Céline briefly escapes the stifling constraints of her marriage through her affair with Julia. By entering into a lesbian relationship, Céline breaks away from her class, that is the specific social relation to her husband, and from the social contract (marriage) that binds her to him.<sup>12</sup> In both texts then, Rochefort twists the conventions of the romance novel. The happy ending of *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* ends leaves a bitter aftertaste with the previously sceptical Josyane seemingly hypnotised by the language of love: '— Philippe. — Jo. — Philippe. — Ma chérie. Tu es à moi? — Oui. — Pour toujours? — Philippe mon amour. — Jo ma chérie' (Rochefort, 1961: 156). *Les Stances à Sophie* on the other hand represents a departure from the conventional boy-meets-girl plot. For the purposes of this study, both texts offer disquieting insights into the formation of girls and young women and the pressures to conform to a social order in which women's role is to reproduce, nurture and carry out domestic chores.

Best known as an activist lawyer, Gisèle Halimi has been a Member of Parliament, she was the former French ambassador to UNESCO and is currently President of *Choisir*. She was born in Tunisia in 1927 into a very traditional and patriarchal Jewish household.

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<sup>12</sup>See Wittig, 1992 for a detailed analysis of radical lesbianism and the categories of sex.

Like Weil, she developed militant tendencies at a tender age — at ten years old she went on hunger strike as a protest against the daughterly duties that involved housework, dishes and waiting on her father and brothers — but whereas Weil was preoccupied with issues of class, Halimi fought against the gender divisions that privileged her brothers and impeded the female members of the family. Gisèle was one of five children and her uneducated parents focused all of their energies and limited resources on the schooling of her older brother so that he might have a successful career. Aware that she could not rely on her family's financial support, but undeterred, Gisèle acquired a part-time job as a private tutor and started to put some money aside. Beauvoir underlined the point that women's liberation can only be secured by gainful employment in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. For seventeen-year-old Gisèle, paid work was indeed the key to her emancipation: her savings enabled her to leave home and go to university in Paris to study law. In her highly inspirational, autobiographical novels, *Le Lait de l'oranger* (1988) and *La Cause des femmes* (1992) Halimi describes how she rebelled against her strict upbringing and obstinately struggled to achieve her career goal.<sup>13</sup> In *Le Lait de l'oranger* Halimi recounts the details of her life, beginning with her earliest memories in Tunisia and ending with the death of her father in 1976. The book is not only an autobiography, but a eulogy to her father, Édouard. The narrative is framed with the events surrounding her father's death, so that the story of her life is literally enclosed within his. At her father's bedside during the last few days of his life, Halimi felt compelled to preserve her father in words, to think about her own origins and about old age, and to retrace the events of her life: 'Dès que je me retrouve seule, chez moi, j'écris. Des notes, un semblant de journal. Pourquoi? Pour qui? Je n'en sais rien. Il me semble, mot après mot, que je confectionne une série d'épithètes' (Halimi, 1988: 404). The author's use of writing as a form of therapy, and the process of resurrecting her father as a means of understanding herself are narrative strategies adopted by another of my selected writers, Marie Cardinal. *La Cause des femmes*, which was originally published in 1978, is a call to arms, a plea to

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<sup>13</sup>Halimi's determination and ruthless ambition often brought her into conflict with other women in the movement, who felt that she operated according to masculine values. See *Histoires du MLF* by Tristan and Pisan, 1977: 86.

women to continue to challenge gynophobic values even though the initial victories over women's bodies have been won: 'Lutter pour s'appartenir physiquement semblait à toutes d'une évidente nécessité. Mais l'erreur eût été de faire de cette bataille une fin alors qu'elle n'est que l'étape qui, franchie, dévoile les batailles futures: le travail, l'éducation, l'indépendance économique, l'insertion dans la vie politique...' (Halimi, 1992: 2). While *Le Lait de l'oranger* is a tribute to Halimi's father, *La Cause des femmes* begins with an account of how her father initially spurned her, because he wanted a son. It was these circumstances that engendered her fierce spirit of revolt, and fuelled her ambition to battle against injustice: 'C'était décidé: je me battrais. Et pas seulement pour moi. Je me battrais pour tous ceux qui se trouvaient dans le même camp que moi' (39). *La Cause des femmes* is also the history of the feminist organisation *Choisir*<sup>14</sup>, which Halimi helped found in 1971 along with Beauvoir, Rochefort, Delphine Seyrig and Jean Rostand. Initially *Choisir* had three main aims: to campaign for freedom of access to contraception and sex education, to work for the repeal of the 1920 law on abortion, and to defend free of charge the signatories of the *Manifeste des 343*. Halimi is perhaps most famously linked<sup>15</sup> to the case that tested the 1920 law, the Bobigny trial of 1972, in which she defended four women — three metro employees and a secretary — who were charged with organising an abortion for the sixteen-year-old daughter of one of them, Marie-Claire Chevalier. The girl's mother, Michèle Chevalier, was found guilty but the fact that she was fined only a nominal sum indicated that the defence team had successfully exposed the horror of backstreet abortion and the hypocrisy of the 1920 law.

Marie Cardinal was born in 1929 in Algeria and has written over a dozen novels.

She is best known for *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975) for which she was awarded the *Prix Littré*.

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<sup>14</sup>*Choisir's* slogan is:

— *Ma liberté: la contraception,*

— *Mon choix, donner la vie,*

— *Mon ultime recours: l'avortement.* See Halimi, 1992: 296.

<sup>15</sup>In 1960 Halimi also famously defended a young Algerian girl, Djamila Boupacha, who had been tortured in police custody. Beauvoir wrote an article about the case for *Le Monde* and later collaborated with Halimi in the writing of *Djamila Boupacha* (1962).

The novel was the first of her works to be translated into English and was made into a film in 1983. Closely based on Cardinal's own experience of mental illness and psychoanalysis, *Les Mots pour le dire* is the account of a woman who undergoes seven years of psychoanalysis to deal with a long-running psychiatric disorder. The structure of the novel is such that the sessions with the analyst are intercut with flashbacks from the narrator's childhood and adolescence, these earlier memories introduced according to the stage she has reached in the exploration of her subconscious. The sections dealing with the narrator's childhood offer a valuable insight into the effects her education had on her formation and intellectual development. *Autrement dit* (1977), a follow up to this novel, takes the form of an interview with Annie Leclerc. Overwhelmed by the many letters she received following the success of *Les Mots pour le dire* and greatly moved by the confidences imparted in these letters, Cardinal wanted to talk to her readers, to share and exchange views. She wished to create a text that would have many of the features of the spoken word: 'Je dois de nouveau prévenir le lecteur que ce livre n'en est pas un, il est une réflexion à voix haute, une conversation avec les autres' (Cardinal, 1977: 7). In this text she rejects the notion that her writing is social documentary or testimony and explains how she was motivated by a desire to stretch the boundaries of conventional genres: 'Je n'aime pas que les livres aient un genre défini, j'aime qu'ils soient à la fois roman, poésie, essai, recherche, histoire, philosophie. Ce que je veux c'est qu'on reconnaisse que j'écris même si je n'écris pas des livres classiques de femmes, «des romans de femmes». Je ne veux pas qu'on dise que je témoigne. On n'a pas besoin d'être écrivain pour témoigner. Or je suis un écrivain' (Cardinal, 1977: 87). *Le Passé empiété* (1983) and *Les Grands Désordres* (1987) are more experimental in their narrative structures than the author's earlier novels. The bi-gendered narrative, which is a feature of both texts, represents a new direction for Cardinal. In *Le Passé empiété* — the story of a woman who feels responsible for the near death of her children — the protagonist merges with her father, the narrative alternating bizarrely between the first and the third person.<sup>16</sup> In *Les Grands Désordres*, the protagonist does not wish to write her own

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<sup>16</sup>This narrative technique has been referred to as 'une manière de "transexualité" littéraire'. See

memoirs because she cannot distance herself sufficiently from the painful memories. She therefore employs a male ghost writer to record her turbulent years spent coping with her daughter's drug addiction and her own subsequent nervous breakdown. As well as being examples of Cardinal's interest in narrative form, the novels both focus on the mother-child relationship and the guilt faced by mothers who work.

Janine Brégeon<sup>17</sup> was born in 1930, is a writer and a painter, and has lived in both Cambodia and India. There have been no significant studies of her writing to my knowledge, and little is known about her life. Brégeon's first novel, *Une journée inutile* (1966) is the story of Suzanne, a housewife and mother of two young children who wakes up one morning and decides not to get out of bed. For a whole day she contemplates her existence, reflecting on her marriage, her children, the opportunities she has missed and the artistic career she abandoned. Brégeon's novel is both a humorous and irreverent look at the tedious and futile nature of domestic chores, and a pitiful account of a housewife's intellectual degeneration and her increasing sense of frustration as she questions the tyrannical social order that structures her life: 'Est-ce qu'il y a un ordre, un ordre qui m'oblige à commencer ma journée comme ça plutôt qu'autrement? Un ordre qui m'oblige à me lever pour faire déjeuner mes enfants' (Brégeon, 1966: 25). Brégeon translates Suzanne's act of rebellion on the page by subverting the rules of grammar and sentence structure. The short, gasping sentences that collide and run into one another simulate the narrator's feelings of suffocation: 'Le récit de Janine Brégeon, de la première à la dernière ligne, va au galop, sans le moindre temps mort. Et ce galop verbal, violent, cru et saccageur a l'accent du plus parfait naturel...' (Hell, 1966: 10). The dislocated, digressive narrative resembles a session with a psychiatrist. As for some of our other heroines, the act of writing is both therapy and exorcism. *Une journée inutile* has much in common with Beauvoir's 'Monologue' owing to the unrestrained ranting of the soliloquist, the unreliable narrator who participates in her own oppression, the oral quality

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Cairns, 1992: 179.

<sup>17</sup>Brégeon has also published under the pseudonym Janine Giraud.

of the narrative, the unconventional punctuation, the vulgar language and the crude, naturalistic descriptions of dirty washing and sleep-encrusted eyes. Certain male reviewers in the bourgeois press<sup>18</sup> were dismissive of *Une journée inutile*, refusing to recognise its aesthetic merits and innovative use of form, preferring instead to summarise the novel in patronising tones: 'Le petit roman de Mme Brégeon n'a peut-être pas grand-chose à gagner aux interprétations' (Kanters, 1966: 5); 'La lessive, la façon de faire une omelette, les bêtises des enfants, les réflexions sur les problèmes de vestiaire, vraiment, nous avons mieux à faire, lecteurs, qu'à gonfler deux heures de notre conscience avec cette bourre des moments nuls d'une vie' (Simon, 1966: 13). Perhaps it has not occurred to Pierre-Henri Simon that if he finds reading about housework tiresome, he might try imagining what it might be like to spend 70 hours a week doing it.<sup>19</sup> Despite some negative reviews, the validity of Brégeon's novel was recognised in the special edition of *Tel Quel*, 'Luttes de femmes'<sup>20</sup>, where it was praised for its treatment of the feminist themes of otherness and of the hierarchical nature of the marriage contract, and for its illustration of the conflict faced by women who accept and refuse patriarchal order at the same time.

Born in 1934 in Bordeaux, Claire Etcherelli lost her father, a docker, when she was eight and was raised by her grandfather. At eighteen, Etcherelli married a trade unionist and they had a child together but they were to divorce several years later and Etcherelli and her young son left Bordeaux for Paris, where she took a job at the Citroën manufacturing plant checking cars on the production line. In her first novel *Elise ou la vraie vie* (1967), which tackles racism, class, poverty and sexual politics in its portrayal of a love affair between a French woman and an Algerian man, Etcherelli drew on her personal experiences of the harsh working conditions and the racially hostile environment of the factory. The Algerian war of independence had officially begun in 1954 and the events of the novel take place in

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<sup>18</sup>The same reviewers, Kanters and Simon, were equally dismissive of Beauvoir's *La Femme Rompue*, when it was published two years later. See Beauvoir, 1972: 178.

<sup>19</sup>This is the figure that the feminist newspaper, *Le Torchon brûle* (1970) identified as the number of hours women spend doing housework each week.

<sup>20</sup>This is how I first came across Brégeon's novel.

the late 1950s, a time when Franco-Algerian relations were especially strained. In Algeria, attacks by the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) on Europeans and French sympathisers prompted cruel retaliations by the French army, while in France, Algerian immigrants were subject to constant police surveillance, frequent arrest and even deportation. Many Algerian immigrants were employed in manufacturing plants, which became areas of heightened racial tension. This then is the historical context of the novel. *Elise ou la vraie vie* was the most successful of Etcherelli's books: it won her the *Prix Femina* and is now a popular secondary school text in France. The fact that a former Citroën worker with no formal education<sup>21</sup> could win such a prestigious prize stunned the literary establishment and gave rise to considerable media interest in the writer. The text was praised for its documentary qualities and for its authentic portrayal of life on the assembly line. Its artistic merit has, however, been acknowledged: the narrator's search for 'la vraie vie' and her journey towards self-knowledge and political awareness have led many critics to classify the novel as a *Bildungsroman*. Etcherelli went on to write two more novels, *A propos de Clémence* (1971) and *Un arbre voyageur* (1978). The three were intended to form a trilogy entitled *Des années noires*. They roughly span the period in France from the 1950s to the late 1960s, and are linked by the peripheral character Anna, believed by critic Dominique Autrand to be a double of Etcherelli.<sup>22</sup> *A propos de Clémence* has a more adventurous structure but a less engaging plot. As in Etcherelli's first novel, the second has a political and social context, focusing for the main part on Spanish immigrants in Paris and the problems they encounter finding work in a foreign and hostile city. The author's third novel is the longest of the three and leads up to the events of 1968. *Un arbre voyageur* is the tale of a woman's journey towards self-discovery and political awareness. At the end of the novel the protagonist's political convictions finally force her to leave the man she loves because he does not share her desire to be actively part of a changing world.

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<sup>21</sup>At the age of nine, Etcherelli had still not learned to read. See Lanzmann, 1967: 82.

<sup>22</sup>Anna is Lucien's sullen mistress in *Elise ou la vraie vie*, she shares a hotel room with Clémence and is her workmate at the supermarket in *A propos de Clémence*, and she reappears in *Un arbre voyageur* as the narrator of the first part of the novel and a close friend of the central character Milie.



Annie Leclerc was born 1940 and after a period as a philosophy teacher, she turned her attention to writing. Her most famous book *Parole de femme* (1974) became a best seller and was favourably received by the press. Leclerc's aim in the text is to revalue the feminine, which she argues has been historically devalued. She begins by undermining masculine values and ridiculing the pomposity and exaggerated virility of screen heroes like Orson Welles: 'Celui-là, il me fait franchement pisser de rire. Grâce à une caméra femelle, constamment à plat ventre devant lui [...], il s'offre le luxe de combiner généreusement les centimètres en hauteur et en largeur' (Leclerc, 1974: 17). The narrative takes the form of a debate with an imaginary male partner: 'Franchement, qu'y a-t-il de si bas dans le travail d'une femme à la maison pour susciter aussi unanimement votre répugnance?' (94), and Leclerc's stance throughout is deliberately provocative, especially in her poetic, quasi-delirious and explicit descriptions of women's bodily experiences: 'Voir et sentir le sang tendre et chaud qui coule de soi, qui coule de source, une fois par mois, est heureux. Etre ce vagin, œil ouvert dans les fermentations nocturnes de la vie, oreille tendue aux pulsations, aux vibrations du magma originaire, main liée et main déliée, bouche amoureuse de la chair de l'autre. Etre ce vagin est heureux' (39). *Parole de femme* is essentially a rapturous celebration of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and the joys of motherhood, in which the author argues that women must embrace their sexuality and revalue their domestic and reproductive functions. Not surprisingly, some feminists, notably Christine Delphy, were intensely critical of the book. Delphy argues that Leclerc's argument is deeply flawed because her revaluation of women's procreative functions effectually reduces woman to the sum of these functions and imprisons her in them. She maintains that Leclerc's arguments are grounded in masculine rhetoric, and steered by the dominant ideology. Not only does Leclerc claim that the sexual division of labour came about 'originellement de façon judicieuse et rationnelle' as a result of women's biological capacity to bear children (Leclerc, 1974: 97), but she ignores the material and social structure of society

and the relations of production: 'It is work done in a subordinate relationship, and not the task, which is devalued' (Delphy, 1987: 48).

Annie Ernaux was born in Yvetot, in rural Normandy in 1940. Her parents ran a café-épicerie and her experiences of growing up in this environment form the basis of nearly all of her novels. *La Femme gelée* (1981) is Ernaux's third novel and describes the heroine's uneasy transition from working-class schoolgirl to middle-class intellectual. The unnamed narrator, now trapped in a bourgeois marriage like the heroine of Rochefort's *Les Stances à Sophie*, re-examines her life from a feminist perspective in an attempt to understand the construction of her femininity. Her aim is to 'débroussailler [s]on chemin de femme' (Ernaux, 1981: 63). Like Cardinal, Ernaux resists attempts to confine her writing within traditional generic classifications, describing herself as ethnologist<sup>23</sup>, historian and sociologist. The narrative strategy of merging fiction with autobiography enables Ernaux to distance herself from her past and undertake a more objective critique of her formative years, while the use of an unnamed narrator stresses the commonality of the heroine's experience. The narrator's growing awareness that language is usurped by the dominant culture to serve its own ends, and that literature marginalises women's experiences lead her to reclaim the heritage she left behind in Yvetot and, 'bring 'subliterary' female experiences into the domain of serious literature' (Holmes, 1996: 264). The claustrophobic four walls of the narrator's universe in *La Femme gelée* are positively reclaimed in a later novel *Passion simple* (1991), where they allow the narrator the privacy to explore her sexuality and conduct a passionate affair with a married man. This reinforces Delphy's thesis that it is not the domestic space or the nature of household chores that is oppressive, but the nature of the contract that allows the husband to appropriate his wife's labour. The sexual double standards described in *La femme gelée* — 'Tous les garçons disent de [Marine], c'est l'entrée du métro [...]'. Durant des années je ne verrai personne défendre la liberté sexuelle des filles et surtout pas les

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<sup>23</sup>In a radio interview with Roger Vrigny transcribed in the appendix of the Routledge edition of her novel *La Place*, she claims that in writing her father's story she wanted to work 'comme un ethnologue' (Ernaux, 1987: 37).

filles elles-mêmes' (Ernaux, 1981: 95) — are gloriously counterbalanced by Ernaux's hedonistic and uncensored validation of female desire and sexual experience in *Passion simple*.

Dorothée Letessier was born in 1953 in Lagny, Seine-et-Marne. Her first novel, *Le Voyage à Paimpol* (1980), is a fictional account of a woman who, like the narrator of *Une journée inutile*, decides she can no longer cope with the pressures at work and home. Maryvonne is a factory worker and trade union representative who lives with her husband and their young son in an industrial town of northern Brittany, Saint-Brieuc. One day she rebels and, leaving a note on the kitchen table ('J'étouffe, je vais prendre un bol d'air'), she sets off alone for the seaside town of Paimpol. Loosely based on the author's own experiences — between 1976 and 1980 Letessier worked as an *ouvrier spécialisé* in the Chaffoteaux plant in Saint-Brieuc — and dedicated to her former female colleagues, the novel is an unpretentious and humorous evocation of the liberating trip. Critics inevitably concentrated on its value as an authentic representation of factory life and on the working-class origins of the author but the novel was nonetheless very well received. *Le Voyage à Paimpol* can be classified as a feminist *Bildungsroman* in that the trip to Paimpol represents an exercise in self-awareness. More sophisticated than the female road movie *Thelma & Louise*, in which the heroines are motivated more by revenge than desire for self-knowledge, Letessier's novel begins with a spirit of militancy and rebellion and ends with a realistic self-appraisal: 'J'enrage d'être à l'usine année après année, mais je n'ose rien tenter pour en sortir' (Letessier, 1980: 152). Letessier's second novel, *Loïca* (1983) is set in the same factory environment but focuses more specifically on sex discrimination in the workplace and the treatment of women within trade unions. The eponymous heroine of the novel is a factory employee and active union member whose rebellious nature and fierce sense of independence cause her to clash both with management and with union officials. A lone parent and divorcee, Loïca is treated contemptuously by the male trade unionists. They argue that her marital and parental status and her sexual reputation make her unsuitable as

a union delegate. However, this masks their deep fear of a woman who, in dispensing with the roles of husband and father, threatens their masculine stability and subverts the hierarchical binary oppositions of father/mother, culture/nature, activity/passivity. An overtly feminist text, *Loïca* evokes a cultural climate in which independent women who transgress gender boundaries — whether in their personal and their professional lives — are perceived as a threat to the social order.

Born in 1954 in Tunisia to Jewish parents, Michèle Fitoussi is one of the editorial staff of *Elle* magazine. She is the author of the best selling novel, *Le Ras-le-bol des superwomen* (1987), a witty, journalistic diatribe in which she exposes the latest myth of femininity and the new oppression, 'La SuperWoman'. Published at a time when the women's movement was less active and less visible — 'Le M.L.F. et toutes les vieilles lunes du féminisme: enterrées, comme la hache de guerre des sexes' (Fitoussi, 1987: 15) — the novel focuses on the generation of French women who, like Halimi and Ernaux's narrator<sup>24</sup>, embraced the model of the liberated woman in *Le Deuxième Sexe* with adolescent enthusiasm. Fitoussi argues that the 1980s have been a decade of extreme stress and disillusionment for women as they struggle to reconcile their desire for self-fulfilment with their sense of duty towards their husband and family. She levels accusations at the 'new man', at the media, at women themselves and at the Beauvoir generation of feminists, who insisted that paid work was the key to women's liberation: 'À cause de VOUS, Simone, Kate, Germaine, Betty, Benoîte, Gisèle<sup>25</sup> et les autres, nous sommes devenues des êtres hybrides, des femâles, dures et tendres à la fois, un bizarre compromis entre l'ange (gardien du foyer) et la bête (de somme)' (137).

The *superwomen* have struggled against the odds to infiltrate male power structures and secure their place on all-male committees. However, despite the fact that the conditions they work in are designed for men with wives, they are still determined to fulfil both roles. This

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<sup>24</sup>See Halimi, 1988: 105 and Ernaux, 1981: 103.

<sup>25</sup>De Beauvoir, Millett, Greer, Friedan, Groult, Halimi (Fitoussi's reference).

new generation of women is still subject to the indoctrination which tells them it is in their nature to be good wives, good mothers and good housekeepers, yet it has also been repeatedly impressed upon them by their mothers' generation that the only way they can realise their full potential is by pursuing a career. Fitoussi recognises that her generation of women were quick to seize the gains fought for by the preceding generation, such as equal opportunities legislation, reproductive rights, and access to male-dominated professions. However, she now perceives a new and double-edged problem. On the one hand, women are so consumed with a desire to succeed in all areas of their life and so convinced that they are capable of it that they are burning themselves out. On the other, support for their cause has largely diminished since it is believed that they have not only achieved everything they set out to attain, but are strong enough to continue juggling several roles simultaneously.

Emmanuèle Bernheim was born in Paris in 1955 and is the youngest of my selected writers. She has written four novels: her third, *Sa femme* (1993), secured her the *Prix Médicis*; her most recent, *Vendredi soir*, which describes a woman's brief sexual encounter with a stranger, was published in 1998. *Sa femme* is the story of Claire, an independent young doctor who embarks on a clandestine love affair with Thomas, a building contractor. Bernheim's economy of style, her lucid, unembellished prose and lack of sentimentality led critic Jòsyane Savigneau of *Le Monde* to describe her as: 'une 'petite sœur' d'Annie Ernaux' (Savigneau, 1993: 25). Bernheim is passionate about film: currently employed as a script reader for television, she previously spent four years working in the picture library of the film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The influence of this medium of representation is evidenced by her use of cinematic effects in the text. The heroine regularly visualises scenarios featuring Thomas and his wife, there are 'close-ups' of the little foil condom packets, and lingering, voyeuristic descriptions of her lover. In marked contrast to most of our other heroines, Bernheim's female protagonists are invigorating millennial role models. Successful professionals who are not defined by their relationship to others and for whom womanhood is more than marriage and motherhood, these unmarried, childless women, at ease with

contraception and with their bodies, have active and satisfying sex lives and unrestrictive relationships.

Considering the texts as a group we can see that most of the writers challenge patriarchal culture either thematically, by deconstructing dominant ideologies and validating female experience, or structurally, by employing particular narrative strategies and by reshaping conventional literary form.

We can also see that with few exceptions, the novels reinforce the insolubility of the paradox discussed earlier that work both liberates and subjugates.

# 1. POLITICS, LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL REALISM

## FRENCH FEMINISTS AND WORK: LIBERTY OR SLAVERY?

My aim in this thesis is to map the evolution in attitudes on women and work in postwar French women's writing. Although my approach is text-based, it is similar in essence to Claire Duchen's discussion in the third chapter of *Feminism in France: from May '68 to Mitterrand* (1986), 'French feminists and motherhood: destiny or slavery?' in which she charts the evolution of the French feminist analysis of maternity during the 1970s and how it united and divided women from different political groups. Duchen details the political and personal endeavours by French feminists to win control over their own bodies, to have the 1920 law prohibiting abortion revoked, and to explore the wider issues surrounding motherhood, areas that had hitherto been neglected. The question of how to address the abortion issue created serious rifts within the women's movement: some treated it as a class issue, in that the rich had access to private clinics abroad while the poor were forced to undergo backstreet abortions; others took a fiercely feminist approach, treating it specifically as a woman's basic right to exercise control over her own body. In parallel, Beauvoir, Weil, Rochefort, Etcherelli and Ernaux focus on the interaction of class and gender in their examinations of women's work, in contrast to Halimi, Brégeon, Cardinal, Leclerc, Letessier and Fitoussi who foreground gender as a fundamental determinant in divisions of labour. At the height of the debate on reproductive rights some feminists responded by rejecting motherhood because it was felt that forced maternity amounted to capitalist ownership of their wombs. Later, this view was judged to be too simplistic: it was clear that refusal of motherhood was an inadequate and unsatisfactory means of counteracting women's oppression. Feminists became interested in valorising the personal experiences of women

and voicing the positive aspects of pregnancy and childbirth. Many women were happier with the flexibility of this alternative approach because it took account of both the personal and the political aspects of motherhood and shifted the focus from the issue to the individual.

In gathering together the various strands of discourse that ran through the women's movement post-1968, Duchen highlights the complexity of the issue of motherhood and the difficulty of reconciling the myriad and conflicting sentiments triggered by the subject. Like motherhood, work is an issue central to women's condition and a topic that has inspired a great deal of feminist analysis. It is particularly interesting that the evolution of the debate on motherhood and the debate on work mirror one another in many respects. Duchen points out that during the abortion campaign, many women were made to feel guilty about choosing motherhood. Similarly, the insistence by Beauvoir and the French women's liberation movement that maternity was a trap and that the only way to achieve fulfilment was to work outside the home not only put immense pressures on women, but also devalued tasks traditionally carried out by women such as housework and bringing up children.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF MAY 1968**

<sup>1</sup> Most of the authors in my selection witnessed the events of May 1968 and experienced the nationwide political and social upheaval that shook France in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. For those women who were actively involved in the May protest the experience was mixed. Many did not like the way they were treated by male militants and resented the fact that they were assigned secretarial and menial tasks rather than being invited to take part in the decision-making. They became disillusioned with male revolutionaries who failed to recognise that patriarchy and not just capitalism was at the root of women's oppression. In order to explore further these alternative theories of oppression



women organised themselves into separate groups and the modern feminist movement in the form of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF)* was born.<sup>1</sup>

The 1970s saw the increasing profile of the women's movement and the publication of numerous feminist publications: *Le Torchon brûle* (1971), a radical feminist newspaper; 'Libérations des femmes, année zéro', a special issue of the journal *Partisans* (1970); Halimi's *La Cause des femmes* (1973); Luce Irigaray's *Spéculum de l'autre femme* (1974), a critique of Freudian psychoanalysis, and 'Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un' (1977) which focuses on the plurality of female sexuality; Hélène Cixous's 'Sorties' in *La Jeune Née* (1975), a deconstruction of classical philosophical thought and patriarchal patterns of language, and 'Le Rire de la Méduse' (1975), in which she outlines the subversive potential of feminine writing. Although feminism did not begin in France in May 1968, the revolutionary fervour generated during the events was fertile soil for the women's movement which flourished during the subsequent decade. Elizabeth Fallaize (1993: 6-7) concluded from her research into the period that the women's movement was without doubt the most important and enduring political movement to emerge from the events and that the growth of the movement had a considerable impact on French women and how they interpreted their changing role and status in society.

Several of the authors I am discussing make direct references to May 1968 and the women's movement in their texts. The final chapter of Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* is a single line that reads simply 'Quelques jours plus tard c'était Mai 68'. The choice of ending is appropriate in that an analogy can be drawn between the narrator's personal struggle and the larger socio-political struggle in France. For years the narrator was suffocated by the traditional and religious values forced upon her by her family, her social class and her schooling. The seven years of psychoanalysis that culminated in her 'rebirth' can be likened to the growing tensions across France that reached their climax in May 1968. Similarly, the

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<sup>1</sup>For more detail on the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* see Duchen, 1986 and 1987 and Tristan and Pisan, 1977.

narrator's desire to reclaim the words to describe both her body and her experiences as a woman can be paralleled with the feminist struggle for reproductive rights in the 1970s, in that women were fighting to regain rights over their own bodies, rights that had been taken from them with the prohibitive abortion laws of 1920.<sup>2</sup> There are similarities in the way both Cardinal and Etcherelli (in *Un arbre voyageur*) use the context of May 1968 in their novels. The heroines of both texts re-evaluate their lives at this time and make a new start. The May events are a political awakening for Etcherelli's heroine, Milie. She senses the end of an era and finds the climate of unrest both exciting and liberating: 'Tout ce qui se passe me délivre' (Etcherelli, 1978: 319), while her partner remains impassive. He is bewildered by all the agitation and regards it as 'un vent de folie' (362). Ultimately, Milie feels compelled to leave Walter and the security of the provinces. She wants to listen to the conversations of the strikers in Paris cafés, see the graffiti on the university walls and embrace the changes with others who share her optimism about the future. The notion of birth, or rebirth, is also picked up by both authors. Cardinal's narrator explains how her psychoanalysis ended when she gave birth to herself (1975: 185) while in *Un arbre voyageur*, Milie politicises her gender by evoking a mystical sense of being impregnated with the spirit of May:

Tandis que la radio, entre deux flashes publicitaires parlait des usines en grève comme de forteresses tombées aux mains de leurs assaillants, tu as senti monter en toi une jouissance tout aussi fulgurante que celles de l'amour. Et à ton insu, Mai te faisait un enfant dont il faudra bien que Walter s'accommode. (Etcherelli, 1978: 345)

Some writers have argued that May '68 carried a deeper significance for women since it offered the opportunity for them to participate not only in the larger struggle against antiquated power structures but also in their specific struggle against the sexual hierarchy within those power structures. Duchon summarises:

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<sup>2</sup>For further details on the abortion laws of 1920 see Halimi, 1992: 125-143.

The importance of May '68 for women, then, was double-edged. It acted as a catalyst, helped bring them to a new awareness of their needs and desires. Women glimpsed the possibility for change, but at the same time they realised that the kind of change they wanted to see would not emerge from a male-dominated revolution, and that they would have to take charge of it themselves. (Duchen, 1986: 8)

## THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE AND THE ROLE OF FEMINIST FICTION

The political revolt became a more personal revolt for women. It was about reclaiming their bodies, reclaiming a language of their own: 'Mai 68 mit le feu aux poudriers' is how Fitoussi (1987: 145) sums up the events with a skilful play on words. Indeed, after 1968, wordplay and language became highly significant for women writers, and the quest to find a form of literary expression that effectively translated women's experience and sexuality was considered to be crucial to the development of the feminist struggle: 'Les instruments de pensée qui existent déjà sont marqués par le signe bourgeois et masculin comme tout ce qui nous entoure, comme le langage le plus commun (il n'y a pas de langage neutre)'<sup>3</sup>, a sentiment echoed by Leclerc (1974: 5 - 6) in *Parole de femme*: 'Rien n'existe qui ne soit le fait de l'homme, ni pensée, ni parole, ni mot [...]. Pas même moi. Surtout pas moi. Tout est à inventer [...]. Inventer une parole de femme.' Flouting syntactic rules and punning constantly became a way of subverting and challenging phallogentric literary norms. Even the titles of the texts that were published during this heady period speak volumes: *Le Torchon brûle* (The Burning Rag), *Les Mots pour le dire* (The Words to Say It), *Autrement dit* (In Other Words), *Parole de femme* (Woman's Word). One publishing house of the 1970s, set up with the sole intention of publishing texts written by women, was named [*Éditions*] *des femmes*, which means women/some women/about women/of women/from women. Even more striking in its linguistic ingenuity is the issue of *Les Temps modernes*, 'Les femmes s'entêtent'. A full analysis of the title is provided in the introductory notes to *New French*

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<sup>3</sup>From *Le Torchon brûle*, no. 3, quoted by Marie-Christine Granjon in 'Les Femmes, le langage et «l'écriture»' in *Critique*, pp. 25 - 32.

*Feminisms* Marks and de Courtivron (1981: 34) explain that the title contains 'an untranslatable quadruple pun': *s'entêter* (to persist in); *entêter* (to go to the head of); *sans tête* (headless, decapitated); *cent têtes* (one hundred heads) and even *téter* (to suck at a bottle/breast).

It was not only in the literary sphere that women's linguistic punning defied the status quo. Language became a powerful tool in a number of public protests. Rochefort and Monique Wittig formed part of the group of women who placed a wreath at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris with the slogan 'Il y a plus inconnu que le Soldat inconnu: sa femme' (Véran, Fohr and Bruckner, 1993: 38).<sup>4</sup> Another group of women called the *Féministes Révolutionnaires* staged a protest against Mother's Day: 'Celebrated one day of the year, exploited the rest' (Duchen, 1986: 15). For French feminists, language — both the spoken and the written word — became a powerful medium through which to challenge assumptions and strike back at oppression. 'It is still the combination of activism in language and politics that is most characteristic of French feminisms,' say Marks and de Courtivron (1981:6). 'Nowhere else have groups of women come together with the express purpose of criticising and reshaping the official male language and, through it, male manners and male power.'

Cixous is the most famous of the linguistic activists. She first used the expression *écriture féminine* in her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975) to describe a subversive, disruptive mode of writing that both defies phallogentric culture by splitting the binary oppositions that have structured western thought, and reclaims otherness. In her analysis of patriarchal binary thought in 'Sorties' (Cixous, 1980a: 90), she finds that the binary oppositions that recur in centuries of legends, philosophy and literature always revert to the couple male/female, where female is the negative underside of this hierarchy: 'Where is she? Activity/Passivity, Sun/Moon, Culture/Nature, Day/Night, Father/Mother, Head/heart, Intelligible/sensitive, Logos/Pathos'. Cixous (1980: 248) asserts that the majority of women

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<sup>4</sup>In *The Condition of Women in France, 1945 to the Present: A Documentary Anthology*, the slogan is reported as 'Il y a toujours plus inconnu que le soldat — sa femme.' See Laubier (ed.), 1990: 71.

authors produce writing that 'is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women'. To counteract this androcentric representation of sexual difference which conceals the true nature of femininity, she exhorts woman to 'write about women and bring women to writing', to 'put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement', and to write her body, to let spring forth 'the immense resources of the unconscious', the 'unheard-of songs' and the 'luminous torrents' (245 - 250). Cixous maintains that it is not the sex of the author that is important — thus the homosexual Jean Genet can inscribe the feminine — but the capacity to subvert patriarchal norms. However, by emphasising language as the main site of the feminist struggle, she glosses over the material factors of women's oppression. While she claims to understand why women have not written — 'writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great — that is for «great men»' (246) — she fails to analyse the social, political and economic factors that disempower women and prevent them from writing. Cixous's theory of sexual difference is controversial for other reasons. Firstly, as Holmes (1996a: 228) explains, feminists who had fought against a theory of femininity grounded in biologism were disturbed to find these theories being reclaimed in the name of women's liberation. Secondly, Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* does not take into account those women writers — and here I am including most of my selected authors — who, although they may use conventional narrative forms, do not 'reproduce classic representations of women' but conversely, give voice to repressed women's experiences, articulate female desire, and actively challenge phallogentric versions of femininity both thematically and structurally.

Both Brégeon, in *Une journée inutile* and Beauvoir, in 'Monologue' break traditional rules of form and style in preference for a more instinctive and fluid style of writing in order to convey not only their heroines' frustration and linguistic alienation, but to demonstrate the inadequacy of masculine patterns of discourse. As we shall see in the chapter on housework, Rochefort, Cardinal and Ernaux deconstruct the language used within a couple

to illustrate how specific words have a different sense depending on whether they are said by a man or a woman.

In *La Femme gelée*, Ernaux (1981: 132) ironises the gulf between her husband's life and hers — which is torn between *purée* and *philosophie* — as she completes a paper on surrealism. The heroine remarks that her husband defends her liberty in theory only: 'Dans la conversation, c'est toujours le discours de l'égalité', but in practice, the facade of political correctness crumbles as her intellectual soulmate launches into crass vituperation: '«Tu me fais chier, tu n'es pas un homme, non! Il y a une petite différence, quand tu pisseras debout dans le lavabo, on verra!»' (133). The *mauvaise foi* of his discourse is patent. The limitations of theory as a liberating force, and the distance between the poetic and the political are starkly underlined by Ernaux. As the heroine goes out for a walk amidst the bourgeois suburban villas, she reflects that the discourses of equality peddled by the intellectual middle classes are illusory: a surrealist trap. The distance between Cixous's passionate description of woman as an ebullient source of life, power and energy, and Ernaux's *femme gelée*, who, frozen into inaction and repetition of gesture, surveys her image in the hairdresser's mirror with bitterness and horror, grimly illustrates that women's salvation hardly lies in analysis. The implication is that a political and cultural revolution is needed to inscribe parity in the warp and woof of daily life.

In their introduction to *Contemporary French Fiction by Women*, Attack and Powrie identify a distinct imbalance in the attention devoted to French feminist theory at the expense of fiction. Attack and Powrie were, however, not the first literary critics to highlight this disproportion. Duchén criticises Marks and de Courtivron for perpetuating 'the image of a feminism that is preoccupied with questions of psychoanalysis and language to the exclusion of practically everything else'. She sets out to show that there is more that unites British and French feminists than divides us, and claims that her collection, *French Connections* clearly demonstrates that French feminism is 'a sister movement that shares the concerns and the

struggles of feminists everywhere' (Duchen, 1987: 12). Nonetheless, her volume is primarily a series of intellectual debates by academic writers and is still the sort of text that would only find its way into the Anglophone world via institutions of higher education. While Marks and de Courtivron and Duchen have produced excellent anthologies containing influential and thought-provoking pieces, their collections focus on a brand of feminism that excludes the majority of women because of its complexity and esotericism. Inevitably then, their texts are destined to circulate in Women's Studies and French university departments amongst an enlightened minority. It is regrettable that in the English-speaking world the French feminist writers with the greatest renown are those whose writings are the most arcane. Rather than seeing French feminism as a 'sister movement' as Duchen puts it, many readers are alienated by these sorts of discourse. Even when key passages are read within their original context, they can remain impenetrable, and recently, Kristeva and Irigaray were among the numerous French intellectuals condemned by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (1997: 49, 104) for using mathematical or scientific terms out of context, and writing convoluted, pseudo-scientific nonsense: 'Kristeva essaie d'impressionner le lecteur avec des mots savants qu'elle ne comprend manifestement pas. [...] Les propos d'Irigaray reflètent une compréhension superficielle des sujets qu'elle aborde et, par conséquent, ils n'apportent rien à la discussion.' Sokal and Bricmont (1997: 15) explain in their introduction that their intention is to deflate texts that have the reputation of being difficult because they are profound. They claim that if these texts seem incomprehensible, it is because they are devoid of sense. One could argue that Sokal and Bricmont have misunderstood the authors' objectives. Part of the reason these theorists use opaque language is not out of a perverse desire to alienate the reader, but as a means of exposing the false transparency of language, to alert the reader to the dangers of assuming that because a text is easily readable, then what is being said must be true. Nonetheless, I would contend — and my chosen texts illustrate this contention — that an author does not have to resort to employing impenetrable discourses in order to challenge familiar assumptions and dominant values.

The texts I am focusing on reach a far wider reading public and can be enjoyed by readers of diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. Most are published in *Livre de Poche* and *Folio* editions; several have won prestigious literary prizes, have appeared on best seller lists or have been adapted for the screen, and a small number have even been translated into foreign languages. Yet surprisingly, these novels rarely appear in anthologies of French feminisms despite the fact that they reflect many of the principles and ideologies of the women's movement, and raise issues that have always been and will always be of interest to feminists: pregnancy, abortion, politics, work, relationships, racism, poverty, mental illness, education and language. Perhaps the most satisfying part of gathering together this material was that it was in looking beyond the French feminist academic canon that I uncovered the most pertinent and detailed accounts of working life in the postwar period.

The consciousness-raising and therapeutic role played by feminist fiction has rarely been acknowledged by feminist critics. Fiction has an ability to move and reach out to readers in a way that theory cannot. One has only to compare Beauvoir's unsympathetic description of the married woman in *Le Deuxième Sexe* — 'La femme est vouée au maintien de l'espèce et à l'entretien du foyer'/'Parce qu'elle ne *fait* rien, elle se recherche avidement dans ce qu'elle *a*'/'C'est à travers [le mari et les enfants] qu'elle se justifie'/'La femme se nourrit de [l'homme] comme un parasite' (Beauvoir, 1949: 226, 263, 280, 328) — with her poignant representation of a married woman in *La Femme rompue*:

Est-ce que je sais qui je suis? Peut-être une espèce de sangsue qui se nourrit de la vie des autres: celle de Maurice, de nos filles, de tous ces pauvres «chiens mouillés» à qui je prétendais venir en aide. Une égoïste qui refuse de lâcher prise; je bois, je me laisse aller, je me rends malade dans l'intention inavouée de l'attendrir.  
(Beauvoir, 1967: 237)



In *Le Deuxième Sexe* Beauvoir retains a scholarly detachment throughout, describing women as if they are a different species, yet her portrayal of Monique was so emotive that it resulted in a mountain of correspondence from readers. Essentially, while feminist theory enables a minority of women to articulate their oppression, through fiction the majority can see a reflection of their own situations as wives, mothers and workers. Certainly, the strong autobiographical and revelatory aspect of the novels I am focusing on enhances their credibility and appeal. The autobiographical, subjective 'I' is adopted by many of my authors not only because it is considered the best means of exploring female identity or a shared social reality<sup>5</sup>, but because it avoids the tone of impersonal authority and the claimed universality of the objective male discourse. The subjective voice is a more politicised voice and is consequently better suited to texts in which the writer expresses a desire to search for or tell the truth. Furthermore, addressing the reader directly in a confessional tone not only creates an impression of authenticity and of sincerity, but sets up a relationship between author and reader, and encourages the reader to look upon the author as a confidante or role model. As a narrative strategy the confessional 'I' is therefore an effective means of creating solidarity and raising feminist awareness.

Like the readers of *La Femme rompue*, readers of Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* identified to such an extent with the female narrator that Cardinal received thousands of letters from women wanting to know more about the author, asking for advice, wishing to share their own experiences. In *Autrement dit* she discusses this overwhelming public response with Annie Leclerc and explains why she feels that writing frankly and unpretentiously about being a woman and experiencing life as a woman enabled her to touch her public so profoundly:

Je crains l'hermétisme c'est-à-dire un chemin qui n'appartiendrait qu'à moi par lequel peu de lecteurs pourraient passer. Je crains ça non pas à cause de la solitude mais

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<sup>5</sup>In *La Femme gelée*, Ernaux uses an anonymous narrator rather than a named character, implying that we are dealing with a common, shared experience as opposed to an individual situation.

à cause de la prétention que ça implique. [...] Dans mes livres je pense que les lecteurs rencontrent une femme qui vit en France, aujourd'hui, et qui ressemble, dans le fond, à toutes les femmes. C'est ce que je suis. (Cardinal, 1977: 61)

Within the growing number of feminist publications now available, it seems that feminist fiction has to struggle to find room among the psychoanalytical, sociological, historical and political texts that make up the bulk of this particular category. Of course, part of the problem relates to the category of 'feminist fiction'.<sup>6</sup> Many women novelists do not want to be classified as writers of feminist fiction for several reasons. Firstly, some feel that writing fiction has more to do with creating characters than dealing with issues, and that the issues are simply a by-product of plot and character development. Etcherelli, when asked about *Elise ou la vraie vie* in an interview in *Le Monde* (Mallet, 1967), confirms this: 'Si j'avais voulu parler seulement de la condition des femmes à l'usine, j'aurais écrit une chronique. Or j'ai choisi la forme du roman parce que je tenais à créer des personnages, à les faire vivre, et parce que j'attache beaucoup d'importance à l'écriture.' Secondly, some novelists may be writing from other equally significant positions, be it from a class, political, generational or ethnic standpoint. Finally, feminism as an ideology has lost momentum largely because of the erroneous view peddled by the media that women have now 'made it', that their battle for equality has been won. And yet, feminist fiction — or fiction written by women who write consciously as women — still has an important role to play in reflecting the basic aims of the women's movement and highlighting the issues that affect working women today. Sociological statistics and historical facts do not present a more authentic view of women's position in the workplace and their changing role within society simply because they are factual documents. They cannot describe the concrete day-to-day concerns of the average French woman or explain what it feels like to be a working woman in the current political, economic and cultural climate. This is why I have chosen fictional texts in which women's

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<sup>6</sup>See David Gascoigne 'Telling her story: directions in French feminist fiction since 1945' in Howorth and Ross (eds.), 1989: 96 - 113 for a summary of the most important French feminist fictional texts published in the postwar period.

lives are not reduced to a collection of important but arid dates and statistics, but where authors have the space and freedom to explore feminist issues through a central character and a particular set of circumstances.

## THE SOCIAL REALISM OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

Realism is the term used to characterise fictional writing that has 'a critical-emancipatory potential, a capacity to encompass (to "concretely portray") whole worlds of diverse historical and social experience, and thus to reveal the deep-laid conflicts of residual, dominant, and emergent ideologies' (Payne, 1996: 107). Most frequently associated with the nineteenth-century novel, it reflects the world in a plausible manner and in discursively familiar language, and encourages identification and engagement with characters. Realist modes of writing have often been used to criticise dominant values, but some critics have argued that 'realism often functions as a mode of false consciousness, a smoothing over of [...] conflicts', and that realist conventions 'are a ruse whereby the novel attempts to conceal or disavow all the signs of its own cultural production' (ibid.). For those feminist theorists for whom form rather than theme is the means to dislocate patriarchal language, the linear chronology, and the rational and rigidly-ordered nature of realism is both masculine and bourgeois. Leclerc (1974: 58) draws a parallel between the linear nature of male discourse and men's sexuality: 'Les hommes, pour autant que je puisse en juger, ont une appréhension linéaire du temps [...]. Ils ne voient que l'Histoire, ils ne se battent que pour elle. Leur sexe se bande, se tend, éjacule, et retombe'. She makes this analogy to demonstrate the impossibility of expressing her own bodily experiences without recourse to a radical and new discourse. However, Holmes illustrates (1996: 247) that 'the elasticity of the form means that [...] all these features can be modified to more subversive ends. In France, [...] Simone de Beauvoir, Elsa Triolet, even Colette have all used modified forms of realism for ends that can broadly be described as feminist'.

The approach I have adopted is to examine texts which, on the whole, use the medium of narrative realism to centre upon the material, cultural and social conditions of women's lives. My aim is to foreground the useful, often poignant, often ironic and always accessible current of writing based on women's lived experience as against the jargon-based, utopian, psychoanalytic and theoretical brands of feminism. Some of the texts I have selected are little known outside France. Their authors are the French equivalents of Anglophone writers like Sara Maitland, Michelene Wandor, Fay Weldon, Joan Smith, Suzanne Moore, Margaret Atwood and Helena Kennedy.<sup>7</sup> Inspired by the everyday and the *cas vécu*, their writing is unaffected, and its autobiographical content has prompted Fallaize (1993: 14) to label it 'the social realism of women's experience'. By dwelling on the domestic drudgery and confinement that have previously been glossed in literature, my authors appropriate and revive a well-worn phallogentric model of writing.

Despite the fact that recent research in the field shows that life is aping art,<sup>8</sup> my aim is not to examine French women's literature from an inverted historical or sociological standpoint in order to assess whether the images of working women are truly authentic,<sup>9</sup> but rather to highlight trends and themes that are common in women's writing and to explore why these motifs recur so frequently. In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar used a similar approach when they examined the relationship between various nineteenth century women writers. They found that similar thematic threads ran through the writings of Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot and Mary Shelley. The motifs that most frequently recurred were images of confinement, entrapment, madness, anxiety, loneliness, alienation, and malaise:

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<sup>7</sup>All of these writers foreground their gender in their writings. Like some of my chosen French authors, Maitland, Wandor and Weldon have written fiction that deliberately undermines the romance plot. See the collection *Passion Fruit: Romantic Fiction with a Twist* (1986).

<sup>8</sup>See Bjør and Pfefferkorn, 1996. Their work is a study of the contradictory nature of women's position in French society. Despite important changes over the last thirty years which have improved women's chances of attaining equality, new forms of discrimination continue to impede their progress.

<sup>9</sup>Toril Moi highlights the pitfalls of this sort of approach in her chapter, 'Images of Women criticism' in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (Moi, 1985: 42-49).

Both in life and art, we saw, the artists we studied were literally and figuratively confined. Enclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society, these literary women were also, inevitably, trapped in the specifically literary constructs of what Gertrude Stein was to call “patriarchal poetry” [...]. We decided, therefore, that the striking coherence we noticed in literature by women could be explained by a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society. (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: xi-xii)

In looking at the social frameworks inhabited by nineteenth century women, Gilbert and Gubar were surprised by the extent to which their social position was reflected in their art. They were led to the conclusion that although these particular writers differed in many respects, the fact that they shared a very specific history of oppression and social constraint led to the existence of a ‘distinctively female literary tradition’ (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: xi).

Cardinal acknowledged the crossover of life and art when in an interview in *Diplômées* she told Laurence Lévy-Delpa (1979: 61-63), ‘Je ne crois pas qu’il existe un roman qui ne soit pas autobiographique.’ Ernaux takes this point further by describing the act of writing as being similar to the work of a social historian.<sup>10</sup> Although none of her novels can be classed as autobiographies or sociological documents, she does describe her work as ‘the attempt to understand the historical and social dimensions of individual experience’.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Ernaux’s novels are fictionalised, sociological autobiographies. The versatility of the realist form allows her greater freedom to develop or place more emphasis on particular events<sup>12</sup> as a means of exploring and understanding the individual.

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<sup>10</sup>See McNeill, 1996.

<sup>11</sup>See Fallaize, 1993: 15.

<sup>12</sup>Cardinal has admitted that when she wrote *Les Mots pour le dire*, she altered certain of her own experiences beyond recognition. She points out in the interview with Lévy-Delpa (1979: 61-63) that in reality her mother’s attempted abortion was not a crucial part of her psychoanalysis: ‘L’avortement raté de ma mère occupe tout le milieu des Mots pour le dire. Et pourtant, il n’a eu aucune importance

As Cardinal and Ernaux exemplify, the female literary tradition that Gilbert and Gubar describe is not limited to the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century feminist texts that I am studying, the social circumstances of women are mirrored in their writings in the form of recurrent themes such as low self-esteem, poor motivation, self-restraint, *mauvaise foi*, self-sacrifice, isolation, psychiatric disorder, weariness, frustration, bitterness and resignation. The frequency with which these motifs recur in the texts show that it is not feasible to ignore the relationship between life and art or to overlook the specificity of women's history, just as it is impossible to deny the fact that we are all products of a particular social milieu, educational background and value system.

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dans mon analyse. C'était un épisode très conscient. Je l'avais tourné dans tous les sens. Je ne me souviens même pas d'en avoir parlé... Or il a pris dans mon livre une importance énorme. C'est l'écriture qui m'a guidée. L'épisode rendait clairement le fond du problème. La violence, le refus de l'enfant s'y lisait clairement.'

## **2. L'ÉCOLE DES FEMMES**

In order to properly understand sexual divisions at home and in the workplace and appreciate why the caring professions are dominated by women, it is essential to look at the girl's formation both within the family unit and in educational institutions. Education plays a crucial role in determining how children apprehend gender differences, and is one of the most influential ways in which sexual hierarchy and orthodox notions of culture are recycled and perpetuated by society. When carrying out research for their book, *Un métier, pour quoi faire?*, a vocational guidance publication for women, Evelyne Sullerot, Jacqueline Chabaud and Claude Ullin found that schoolgirls who were asked how they imagined themselves at the age of forty responded very differently from boys of the same age. The girls conjured up images of a husband, an 'intérieur coquet'<sup>1</sup> and children, to be followed by an interesting job. For the boys, it was the reverse. The authors were so convinced these responses were representative that they urged young female readers to do their own research:

Posez maintenant cette question à votre frère, votre ami, votre fiancé: comment toi, garçon, t'imagines-tu à 40 ans? Il vous répondra en parlant de son métier, d'abord, et ensuite, de son foyer. Pour lui, l'avenir professionnel, brillant ou non, constitue une obligation, un désir, un point fixe.

Pour une fille, l'avenir professionnel, brillant ou non, c'est une suite de points d'interrogation et de points de suspension. (Sullerot, Chabaud, and Ullin, 1969: 17-18.)

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<sup>1</sup>See Ernaux, 1981: 134.

Chabaud, Sullerot and Ullin found that not only did the girls in their study tend to visualise their futures as wives and mothers but they were also more inclined to see themselves working in professions such as nursing or teaching. One possible explanation is that they felt this type of work complemented what they felt to be their roles as women. Beauvoir's rationale for this tendency came in a lecture she gave in Japan, 'La Femme et la création', which is quoted later in this chapter.

With reference to my chosen texts, I will be looking at the extent to which the heroine's education plays a role in the choices she makes about her course of study, her work and her lifestyle, and examining why many girls opt for typically female subjects such as the arts or biology — 'rien que des nanas'<sup>2</sup> — which reduce future employment opportunities and perpetuate existing gender stereotypes. In addition, I will be exploring the social, financial, religious and cultural pressures on girls at school, which all combine to encourage women into specific occupational sectors.

## THE FEMALE CURRICULUM AND CAREER PROSPECTS

A relatively recent study, *Allez les filles!* by Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet (1992: 11-13), revealed that today in France girls do better than boys in primary school, in secondary school and in further education, where 42 per cent of girls have the *baccalauréat* compared with 32 per cent of boys. However, their success at school does not automatically lead to success in the workplace, where, despite equality legislation,<sup>3</sup> women still earn less than men and find it more difficult to gain promotion. Baudelot and Establet (1992: 16) pinpoint the problem that lies at the heart of the school system: although girls have made enormous progress at every level of education there still persists a conspicuous segregation of the sexes, with scientific subjects and preparatory classes for the *grandes écoles*

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<sup>2</sup>Ernaux, 1981:108.

<sup>3</sup>See Appendix for details.



remaining 85 per cent male. While there is a fairly even mix of girls and boys in classes right up until the end of secondary school, this alters dramatically when the time comes for students to specialise and think about a career, with the result that at colleges of further education there is what Baudelot and Establet (1992: 159) call a sort of 'sexual apartheid'. Sadly, it would appear that girls' attainment is not matched by their assertiveness.

## BEAUVOIR AND EDUCATION: INCONSISTENCIES BETWEEN HER MEMOIRS AND HER FICTION

Beauvoir's subject and career choices constitute a fascinating but ambiguous case study. By initially choosing to study philosophy she elected to follow a path normally taken by more educationally privileged male students, yet she later opted for a literary career. In *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, the writer claims she did not ever feel disadvantaged being born a girl and that since she had no brother, she was never conscious that certain liberties were denied her because of her sex (Beauvoir, 1958: 77). However, her biographer, Deirdre Bair (1990: 145-146) highlights a key episode which seems to suggest that Beauvoir was discriminated against at the time of her *agrégation* exam in philosophy when she was twenty-one years old. It appears that the interests of Jean-Paul Sartre, who was also competing in the exam, were favoured. The examiners, despite feeling that Beauvoir's performance excelled Sartre's, decided that since he had failed the previous year, and because he was a student of the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, it was more appropriate that he be awarded first place.

Toril Moi, in *Simone de Beauvoir: the Making of an Intellectual Woman*, questions why Beauvoir was so willing to accept that he was the more gifted candidate in the *agrégation* exam, and why in her memoirs she feels it necessary to prove the examiners right by constantly maintaining his intellectual superiority. Moi develops Michèle Le Doeuff's

analysis of the Beauvoir-Sartre relationship<sup>4</sup> by examining further the relevant passage in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*:

Sartre, tous les jours, toute la journée, je me mesurais à lui et dans nos discussions, je ne faisais pas le poids. Au Luxembourg, un matin, près de la fontaine Médicis, je lui exposai cette morale pluraliste que je m'étais fabriquée pour justifier les gens que j'aimais mais à qui je n'aurais pas voulu ressembler: il la mit en pièces. J'y tenais, parce qu'elle m'autorisait à prendre mon cœur pour arbitre du bien et du mal; je me débattis pendant trois heures. Je dus reconnaître ma défaite; en outre, je m'étais aperçue, au cours de la conversation, que beaucoup de mes opinions ne reposaient que sur des partis pris, de la mauvaise foi ou de l'étourderie, que mes raisonnements boitaient, que mes idées étaient confuses. «Je ne suis plus sûre de ce que je pense, ni même de penser», notai-je désarçonnée [...]. Mais tout de même, après tant d'années d'arrogante solitude, c'était un sérieux événement de découvrir que je n'étais ni l'unique, ni la première: une parmi d'autres, et soudain incertaine de ses véritables capacités. (Beauvoir, 1958: 480)

Moi sees this discussion as crucial since it leads Beauvoir to re-evaluate her ambitions and beliefs, and concede that Sartre is her intellectual superior. Though she does not completely abandon philosophy she chooses to concentrate on a more traditionally female subject, literature.<sup>5</sup> As Moi points out, this change of heart is not only remarkable because of Beauvoir's brilliant academic record — in 1929 only eight other women had ever passed an *agrégation* in philosophy and at twenty-one Beauvoir was the youngest in France<sup>6</sup> — but also because at that time Sartre was a young student who had initially failed his own

<sup>4</sup>See Le Doeuff, 1991: 135.

<sup>5</sup>Beauvoir justifies her decision to focus on literature rather than philosophy in *La Force de l'âge*. However, her explanation makes it sound as if she chose literature because she was not good enough to be a philosopher: 'La philosophie était pour moi une réalité vivante. Elle me donnait des satisfactions sur lesquelles je ne me blasai jamais. Cependant, je ne me considérais pas comme une philosophe; je savais très bien que mon aisance à entrer dans un texte venait précisément de mon manque d'inventivité. [...] Je voulais communiquer de qu'il y avait d'original dans mon expérience. Pour y réussir, je savais que c'était vers la littérature que je devais m'orienter' (Beauvoir, 1960: 254-255).

<sup>6</sup>See Francis and Gontier, 1979: 34.

*agrégation*: he had not yet matured into Sartre the existentialist philosopher and author. Indeed, throughout their lives together, Sartre sought her approval of every word he wrote, and discussed his theories and ideas only with her, frequently revising his work as a result of her criticisms:

D'une certaine manière, si vous voulez, je lui dois tout. [...] Quand je lui montre un écrit, ce que je fais toujours, et qu'elle fait des critiques, je commence par me mettre en colère et la traiter de tous les noms. Puis, je les accepte toujours.

Une fois qu'elle me donne en quelque sorte «l'imprimatur» je lui fais une totale confiance et jamais les critiques des autres ne m'ont fait changer d'opinion sur une chose que j'avais faite. Dans une certaine mesure on peut dire que j'écris pour elle ou plus exactement pour qu'elle filtre la chose. (Francis and Gontier, 1979: 20)

Sartre's writings seem to exercise an equally mesmerising and stultifying effect on two of our other authors, Cardinal and Ernaux.<sup>7</sup> What we can conclude from Sartre's admission is that he would almost certainly not have become Sartre the philosopher had he not been helped by Beauvoir, and yet nearly thirty years after the incident in the gardens, Beauvoir persists in positing herself as an immature student and Sartre as her mentor. While Beauvoir maintains that becoming a writer was her free and existential choice, it is evident that she placed the needs of Sartre first, as if his success was more important to her than her own. Moi makes several suggestions as to why Beauvoir chooses to portray herself as a second-rate philosopher, one being that Beauvoir is '[compromising] between the wish to fascinate as a woman and the wish to fascinate as an intellectual' (Moi, 1994: 23). In other words, Beauvoir is in the difficult position of wanting to seduce Sartre and impress him intellectually without threatening his masculinity or diminishing her 'feminine' allure.<sup>8</sup> While Beauvoir admits to feeling deflated at discovering she was 'ni l'unique, ni la première', she

<sup>7</sup>See Cardinal, 1975: 255 and Ernaux, 1981: 94.

<sup>8</sup>The notion that an overly active intellect was not a particularly 'feminine' quality is reflected in Sartre's description of Beauvoir in an interview in *Vogue* in 1965 when he describes her as intellectually not being like a woman at all: 'La merveille chez Simone de Beauvoir, c'est qu'elle a l'intelligence d'un homme [...] et la sensibilité d'une femme.' (Francis and Gontier, 1979: 20.)

has an interest in describing Sartre as the more dominant intellectual partner. Because of the considerable advantages men enjoy under patriarchy she has confessed that she could only ever love a man with a superior intellect to her own (Beauvoir, 1958: 202). Moi argues that Beauvoir shapes her memoirs to a certain extent because by continually idolising Sartre, he appears as her ideal and her destiny. Her later account of the philosophical defeat in the Luxembourg Gardens may thus be interpreted as the fulfilment of her desires in that she has finally met her match. It arguably also facilitates the game of complicity and power that structured their relationship. Yet Beauvoir's conduct is inconsistent with the general tenet of her critique of women's *mauvaise foi*. In *Le Deuxième Sexe* she claims it is the patriarchal system that leaves a girl convinced of her own limitations because teachers and parents are persuaded that one sex is more able than the other:

On a vu que des fillettes de quatorze ans déclaraient au cours d'une enquête: «Les garçons sont mieux; ils travaillent plus facilement.» La jeune fille est convaincue que ses capacités sont limitées. Du fait que parents et professeurs admettent que le niveau des filles est inférieur à celui des garçons, les élèves l'admettent aussi volontiers; et effectivement, malgré l'identité des programmes, leur culture est dans les lycées beaucoup moins poussée. A part quelques exceptions, l'ensemble d'une classe féminine de philosophie par exemple est nettement en dessous d'une classe de garçons: un très grand nombre des élèves n'entendent pas poursuivre leurs études [...]. Quand on abordera des concours sérieux, l'étudiante prendra conscience de ses manques; elle les attribuera non à la médiocrité de sa formation, mais à l'injuste malédiction attachée à sa féminité; se résignant à cette inégalité, elle l'aggrave. (Beauvoir, 1949, vol. II: 622)

Not once does Beauvoir suggest that Sartre had acquired his advantage over her because of his privileged education, nor does she indicate that she was in any way disadvantaged by the shortcomings of her own schooling, described in *Mémoires d'une*

*jeune fille rangée* (1958: 223) as 'Onze ans de soins, de sermons, d'endoctrinement assidu'. Moi rightly comments: 'Even in her own account literature is marked as an "easier" — more "feminine" — option: somehow Beauvoir's free choice comes to coincide with dominant social ideas of what would make a suitable profession for an intellectual woman' (Moi, 1994: 34). Moi (1994: 34) concludes that existentialist feminism may explain the gap. As the author of what is perhaps the most famous feminist text she is well aware of the effects of nurture, yet this conflicts with her belief that the individual can make free choices.

This conflict of interests is most apparent in her short story 'La Femme rompue'<sup>9</sup>, the final story in the collection of the same name. Beauvoir warned readers in the original preface that the heroine was 'la victime stupéfaite de la vie qu'elle s'est choisie'<sup>10</sup>, yet the majority of them empathised with Monique.

Educationally, Monique's circumstances seemed favourable. Her father was a doctor and this was clearly the inspiration behind her decision to study medicine at university. However, when she met and fell in love with Maurice, a fellow medical student, her priorities soon changed. Monique became pregnant, they married and she decided to devote herself to her family. Monique attempts to justify her decision to give up her studies with all too conventional reasons. She vows that she gave up any hope for a career out of love for Maurice because she wanted him to be successful (Beauvoir, 1967: 194). She claims both that she wanted to devote herself fully to her children (125) and that remaining at home full-time was her true vocation and a job at which she excelled (158, 188). She further maintains she was not cut out for medicine because the training deeply unsettled her (195). But Monique is slow to acknowledge that the consequence of her choice is intellectual stagnation:

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<sup>9</sup>When *La Femme rompue* is in italics I am referring to the collection. When 'La Femme rompue' is written within quotation marks I am referring to the short story in the collection.

<sup>10</sup>From Beauvoir's *prière d'insérer*, quoted in Francis and Gontier, 1979: 232.

J'ai laissé mon intelligence s'atrophier; je ne me cultivais plus, je me disais: plus tard, quand les petites m'auront quittée. [...] Oui, la jeune étudiante que Maurice a épousée qui se passionnait pour les événements, les idées, les livres était bien différente de la femme d'aujourd'hui dont l'univers tient entre ces quatre murs.

(Beauvoir, 1967: 211)

The juxtaposition of 'l'univers' and 'ces quatre murs' throws the narrow limitations of her life into sharp relief. She is faced with the uncomfortable realisation that Maurice, in embarking on an affair with Noëllie, has fallen in love with the woman Monique could have been. When she married her husband she sacrificed her own identity in order to become Maurice's wife and the children's mother. Now she is left to question the function and validity of her role in life. 'On ne lui a appris qu'à se dévouer', Beauvoir (1949, vol. II: 467) writes in her chapter on maturity and old age, 'et personne ne réclame plus son dévouement'. She has spent her entire married life defining herself according to her relationship with others and has relied on her family to give her life meaning. Suddenly her sacrifice turns to ashes and the thought that she will have to create a new identity for herself terrifies her:

Moi j'ai perdu mon image. Je ne la regardais pas souvent; mais, à l'arrière-plan elle était là, telle que Maurice l'avait peinte pour moi. [...]

Et je me demande à présent: au nom de quoi préférer la vie intérieure à la vie mondaine, la contemplation aux frivolités, le dévouement à l'ambition? Je n'en avais pas d'autre que de créer du bonheur autour du moi. Je n'ai pas rendu Maurice heureux. Et mes filles ne le sont pas non plus. Alors? Je ne sais plus rien. Non seulement pas qui je suis mais comment il faudrait être. (Beauvoir, 1967: 238, 251)

As well as confronting her own intellectual and cultural self-neglect, Monique is also forced to question whether her grown-up daughters have wasted their academic prospects, and whether she is responsible for this: 'Hier soir, nous avons dîné chez Colette. [...] De

nouveau je me suis demandé avec terreur: est-ce ma faute si la brillante lycéenne de quinze ans est devenue cette jeune femme éteinte?’ (219). All three females<sup>11</sup> in the family interrupt their studies at a crucial stage, that is, when their professional future is most at stake. A promising academic future does not prevent either Colette or Monique from falling into the trap of the full-time housewife. Lucienne is not trapped in a relationship but she turns down the possibility of a career in medicine because she wants to break free from her family.<sup>12</sup> Discussing the novel in the final volume of her memoirs, *Tout compte fait*, Beauvoir (1972: 175-178) condemns Monique for taking the easy option even though Beauvoir herself took the ‘easier’, more ‘feminine’ option when she chose literature instead of philosophy. Her critique of Monique gives the lie to the view expressed in her non-fictional work and in lectures, where she holds that even gifted women do not attain the same heights as their male counterparts because there are barriers every step of the way, whether due to prejudice, discrimination, overwhelming family responsibilities or because women themselves feel it is pointless to continue along an avenue which is continually blocked:

D’abord elles sont assujetties à toutes les servitudes familiales dont j’ai parlé l’autre jour. Elles ont des soucis; elles sont obligées de penser à d’autres choses qu’à leur carrière; elles doivent partager leur temps entre leur travail professionnel et celui qu’elles font à la maison. Alors elles n’osent pas envisager de se lancer sur des chemins ardu. Et je crois que je touche là à ce qui est peut-être le plus important. Les femmes elles-mêmes, dans la mesure où elles tentent quelque chose, ne le tentent pas avec la même audace, avec le même espoir que les hommes. [...] A quoi bon prétendre faire de la médecine générale ou devenir un grand psychiatre ou un grand spécialiste quand vous savez que vous n’aurez pas les appuis nécessaires, ni la clientèle nécessaire? Alors, très sagement, vous vous cantonnez

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<sup>11</sup> Colette’s promising future is passed over for the sake of a mediocre marriage to Jean-Pierre. Maurice is equally disappointed with Lucienne’s decision to make a new life in America as he had hoped she would continue with her medical studies and join him in his research.

<sup>12</sup> It is never clear whether Lucienne is successful with her studies in America because Monique is an unreliable narrator and her representation of events is flawed. Although she originally describes her daughter as being fulfilled and happy (188, 190) she later describes her as having a shallow and lonely existence, devoid of interest (249-250).

dans la gynécologie, la pédiatrie, dans la médecine sociale; vous acceptez de petits postes dont les collègues masculins ne voudraient pas...<sup>13</sup>

It is only our most contemporary heroine, Claire of *Sa femme*, who is the exception to the rule since she is represented as having a fulfilling career as a general practitioner. Beauvoir delivered this lecture only a year before the publication of *La Femme rompue*. While stressing that women must try to overcome the obstacles in their way and not allow themselves to be intimidated by the fact that very few women in the past have made it to the top, she suggests that it is not women's nature that holds them back but their circumstances (nurture), and that to modify the situation requires an enormous effort:

La femme est marquée, je le répète, non seulement par l'éducation qu'elle reçoit directement, de ses parents ou de ses professeurs, mais aussi par ses lectures, par les mythes qui lui sont communiqués par les livres qu'elle lit [...] — elle est marquée par l'image traditionnelle de la femme et s'en écarter, c'est quelque chose pour elle de très difficile. (Francis and Gontier, 1979: 471)

Yet Beauvoir is consistently unsympathetic when it comes to her own protagonists. She explains that when she wrote 'La Femme rompue' her intentions were that it be read as if it were a detective story (Beauvoir, 1972: 175-176). It is up to the reader to unearth the clues interspersed throughout the text that point to Monique's guilt. While it is true that Monique is guilty of not facing up to the truth, of wallowing in self-pity and refusing to take responsibility for her own actions, her husband must take some of the blame. At no point does Beauvoir suggest that Maurice might have profited from his wife sacrificing her career to stay at home and take care of the children. Although Monique has a tendency to omit details from her journal or to gloss her early married bliss, there is no evidence that Maurice

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<sup>13</sup>From 'La Femme et la création', a lecture given in Japan in 1966. See Francis and Gontier, 1979: 460-461. Beauvoir's views on what are high-grade and lower-grade posts in medicine deserve closer inspection. It is suspect that she regards gynaecology and paediatrics as less prestigious options when these are the branches of medicine concerned with women and children.



dissuaded Monique from giving up her medical studies. Nor is there any proof that he encouraged her to return to work earlier on in their marriage when it might have been worthwhile. On the contrary, he commended her abilities as a homemaker. It is conveniently only when the children have grown up and left home that Maurice suggests she get a job as a distraction. I would endorse Anne Ophir's view in *Regards féminins* that Maurice's motives are suspect:

A-t-il peur que sa femme, quelque peu déchargée des tâches ménagères, ne lui pèse? Son insistance à la faire travailler est suspecte [...]. Quel travail convient à une quadragénaire sans métier et qui est restée une vingtaine d'années au foyer? , Maurice ne semble pas envisager que, pour sa femme, le travail pourrait être autre chose qu'une passe-temps de dame désœuvrée [sic]. Que Monique s'occupe — bon sang! — à autre chose qu'à lui peser et à susciter des commérages sur le compte de sa maîtresse! Exaspéré, il lui lance un jour: les femmes qui ne font rien ne peuvent pas blâmer celles qui travaillent [p.155]. Objectivement, Maurice a sans doute raison, mais que ne s'en est-il aperçu vingt ans plus tôt? (Ophir, 1976: 74)

Monique's spiralling descent into depression and her subsequent identity crisis force the reader to consider the factors that influence women to sacrifice their own career prospects and prioritise their husbands' careers in exchange for a life of devotion to their families. Monique obviously suffers from the lack of intellectual stimulation in her life. Her eagerness to read the latest novels, to see and discuss the latest films or plays prove that she still yearns for knowledge and culture.<sup>14</sup> Afraid of feeling useless, of slipping into a state of intellectual stagnation, she does charitable deeds and initially assists her husband with his career. Monique is kept busy due to her involvement with Maurice's patients (Beauvoir, 1967: 138), the care and upbringing of her two daughters, and her later preoccupation with

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<sup>14</sup>Although Monique admits that she later uses this as a strategy so that Maurice will still find her interesting: 'J'ai compris qu'il avait compris pourquoi j'écoutais cette musique et il ne m'aurait pas crue si j'avais prétendu la goûter. Résultat: je n'oserai pas lui parler de mes récentes lectures, bien qu'en fait un certain nombre de ces "nouveaux romans" m'aient plu. Il penserait aussitôt que je veux damer le pion à Noëllie' (Beauvoir, 1967: 181).

Marguerite, the teenager in state care (124), but this is a far cry from the ambitions she had as a girl, when she thought medicine was '[le] plus beau métier' (195).<sup>15</sup>

## EDUCATION AND GENDER STEREOTYPING

Harsh economic privation reinforces educational stereotyping. The *bourgeoise*, Monique, chose to be a doctor's 'assistant', that is, her husband's helper, when she had the chance to become a doctor, whereas Josyane, of Rochefort's *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, does not get any chance to show her true potential. The narrator of *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* grows up in a large working-class family at a time when France is trying to reverse the disquieting drop in the birth-rate by giving families financial incentives (that is, generous family allowance payments) so that they might have more children.<sup>16</sup> Rochefort paints a satirical picture of the French working classes in the 1950s, especially as she appears to give credence to the commonly-held belief that working-class families only had children so as to be able to buy electrical goods which they could otherwise not afford. At school Josyane is viewed as an eccentric by her classmates because of her passion for grammatical analysis, but what dampens her initial enthusiasm is primarily the sheer indifference of her parents towards her progress at school.<sup>17</sup>

Une fois dans la classe d'avant j'avais été troisième, on ne sait pas pourquoi, un coup de veine, toutes les autres devaient être malades; j'avais mis le livret sous le

<sup>15</sup>This is echoed ironically by the narrator's schoolteachers in *La Femme gelée*: 'Maman [...], c'est le plus beau métier' (Ernaux, 1981: 55).

<sup>16</sup>See Maruani, 1985: 81 on France's birth rate policy: 'La politique familiale [...] est aussi une politique de l'emploi. Une politique contre l'emploi des femmes. Une politique d'incitation à la cessation d'activité dans une période où les taux d'activité féminins ne font que croître. Une politique de discrimination indirecte à l'égard des femmes au moment où l'on veut promouvoir l'égalité professionnelle entre les sexes.'

<sup>17</sup>It should be pointed out that Monsieur and Madame Rouvier are not particularly interested in Josyane's brother's progress at school either. When Patrick is suspended from school his mother is anxious for him to return not because she is concerned about the lessons he has missed but because she is irritated by his presence at home where he is constantly under her feet (Rochefort, 1961: 25-26). However, the crucial difference between Patrick and Josyane is that he is not encumbered with housework like his sister.

nez de papa ce coup-là, il l'avait regardé et me l'avait rendu en disant Bon. Au cas où la colonne lui aurait échappé je dis: «Je suis troisième.» Ça donna: «Ah! bon.» Point c'est tout. (Rochefort, 1961: 25)

Josyane's studies are further trivialised by the way in which household chores are deemed far more urgent. It is only when they are completed and when everyone has gone to bed that she can sit down and do her homework in peace (10-11, 15, 23, 28). The situation Josyane describes could not be more different from that experienced by the privileged Beauvoir whose parents supervised her homework and took a great interest in her achievements at school. Furthermore, Beauvoir's mother did not impinge on her studying time by allotting her numerous chores<sup>18</sup>: 'Dans les choses importantes — mes études, le choix de mes amies — elle n'intervenait peu; elle respectait mon travail et même mes loisirs, ne me demandant que de menus services: moudre le café, descendre la caisse à ordures' (Beauvoir, 1958: 147).

What is especially poignant in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* is that Josyane does not regard education as a means to an end. She sees it not as an escape route but as escapism: school is a place where she has no domestic responsibilities and where meals arrive ready prepared (Rochefort, 1961: 10). Even homework is escapism, she does not consider it a chore like other children because it is associated in her mind with calm and tranquillity: 'Quel bonheur quand ils étaient tous garés, et que je me retrouvais seule dans la nuit et le silence! [...] A dix heures et demie c'était fini. Plus rien. Le désert. J'étais seule' (11). For Josyane learning is a luxury. Madame Rouvier is astonished when Josyane expresses a desire to attend an extracurricular catechism class, not realising her daughter has an ulterior motive. Josyane is quick to comprehend that by returning home an hour and a half later each Monday, she arrives when all the chores are finished (16).

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<sup>18</sup>However, according to Bair's biography, Beauvoir's younger sister, Hélène, did have to help out with the housework: 'As time went on and Simone's studies became both more demanding and engrossing, Françoise [Beauvoir's mother] tried to relieve her of some household responsibility by shunting some of it onto Hélène or else doing it herself' (Bair, 1990: 58).

' Sadly, the purpose of education and the benefit it can yield eludes her and is not clarified for her. She has no desire to compete and once she has mastered something in class she prefers to repeat the same exercise rather than progress onto a new challenge, much to the annoyance of her teachers:

Même je crois que plus ça ne servait à rien plus ça me plaisait.

J'aurais bien passé ma vie à faire rien que des choses qui ne servait à rien.

«As», verbe être, 2e personne du singulier, auxiliaire de «donné»;

«Donné», verbe donner, participe passé.

' La maîtresse disait: «Ce n'est pas la peine d'en mettre tant Josyane; essaie plutôt de ne pas laisser d'étourderies ça vaudra mieux. (Rochefort, 1961: 24)

She is capable of deconstructing a sentence and analysing the various components but she cannot apply this rationale outside of the classroom. Schoolwork is a distraction for Josyane, rather than a means to develop her critical faculties or acquire transferable skills. Rochefort endows her adolescent creation with a rich and colourful vocabulary, and through Josyane, the reader is treated to witty and wryly humorous character sketches of the Rouvier family: 'Notre père montrait une connaissance du pinard dont il ne faisait pas preuve en ville, à croire que le bon air lui donnait de l'instruction' (63). One could imagine a real Josyane growing up to become a political satirist. However, the fictional Josyane's potential is never recognised at school. In this sense the educational system itself can be held responsible for its failure to motivate economically disadvantaged girls. For example, in her catechism class Josyane's natural enthusiasm is frowned upon and she is instructed not to question but to learn by heart: '[Mlle Garret] me dit que je n'avais pas à chercher à comprendre, mais à savoir par cœur, c'était tout ce qu'on me demandait. Mais moi je ne peux pas réciter par cœur un truc que je ne comprends pas, c'est comme si j'essayais d'avalier un tampon jex' (18). The pedagogic inconsistencies of Josyane's teachers explain why she fails to grasp

how education can benefit her in the long-term. In her religious education classes she learns that repetition is a requisite and that critical analysis is inappropriate, yet she is reprimanded at school when she repeats the same task over and over again. Her intriguing habit of prolonging set exercises suggests she has a subconscious desire to remain at school and away from chores. When she successfully passes her school leaving certificate first time, she is clearly disappointed: 'J'avais eu mon Certificat du premier coup; manque de pot; j'aurais bien tiré un an de plus, mais il me reçurent. Je ne pourrais plus aller à l'école' (94).

A similar scenario occurs in Letessier's *Loïca*, when a combination of financial pressures and domestic oppression oblige the heroine to leave school, when her love of learning is such that she would have preferred to continue with her studies (Letessier, 1983: 40). Josyane is not as academically minded as Loïca but she is held back by the same gender and class restrictions.

Josyane's subsequent interview with the careers advisor is a woeful illustration of the way in which working-class girls are steered towards poorly remunerated, unskilled and mundane jobs. The mindless tasks she is assigned are more a test of her aptitude to work on an assembly line than an assessment of her interests and abilities: 'On m'a fait enfiler des perles à trois trous dans des aiguilles à trois pointes, reconstituer des trucs complets à partir des morceaux, sortir d'un labyrinthe avec un crayon, trouver des animaux dans des taches, je n'arrivais pas à en voir' (Rocheft, 1961: 95). Once it has been established that Josyane can perform these tasks, the careers advisor takes her through a list of possible jobs which Josyane describes as being 'aussi assommants les uns que les autres' (95). She is bewildered when then asked if she has a vocation:

Je ne pouvais pas choisir. Je ne voyais pas pourquoi il fallait se casser la tête pour choisir d'avance dans quoi on allait se faire suer. Les gens faisaient le boulot qu'ils avaient réussi à se dégatter, et de toute façon tous les métiers consistaient à aller le

matin dans un truc et y rester jusqu'au soir. Si j'avais eu une préférence ç'aurait été pour un où on restait moins longtemps, mais il n'y en avait pas. (Rochefort, 1961: 96)

The whole session with the careers advisor is depressingly futile. Josyane is left with the same feeling of emptiness and unease Loïca feels when she leaves school. Cinema replaces homework as a distraction and a means to escape the four walls of the family home, but unsurprisingly she exercises no critical judgement when she watches the films: 'J'y serais allée tous les soirs, et tous les films sans exception me plaisaient; toute l'affaire c'était que ça défile sur l'écran, sans une minute d'arrêt' (104).

Once away from school Josyane passively slips into the role she previously shunned. She begins to think it is pointless trying to resist. Even people she admires, like Ethel's brother Marc, are so bogged down with the drudgery of their day to day existence that they fail to escape the eternal routine of *métro-boulot-dodo*:

Quand je voyais cette population je me disais qu'il fallait vraiment être un pêcheur de lune pour l'imaginer autrement que le cul sur une chaise devant un plat rempli ou une image qui bouge. Merde [...]. La trappe s'était refermée. S'était-elle jamais ouverte, ou si j'avais rêvé? (Rochefort, 1961: 145)

The most plausible explanation for Josyane's flagging motivation is that she has not only been let down by a school system that crushes the aspirations of working-class children, but she has suffered from a lack of encouragement and a scarcity of positive role models in her immediate environment. With no long-term vision of her future, the best she can do to escape her present role as 'la bonne de tout le monde' (145) and to fill the void leaving school has left is to get married and start a family of her own.

The narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* grows up in quite a different environment from the one portrayed in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*. Her well-to-do family lives in a large house and the narrator attends a good school and has an English nanny. However, her religious education and strict upbringing quash any sense of individualism and ambition and she initially conforms to her family's bourgeois ideals. Because her mother is a devout Catholic, the narrator is schooled at an institution where the emphasis is on virtuous, Christian conformism. Although religion in itself has little significance for her, she tries her best to be docile in order to win her mother's affections. This entails accompanying her mother to mass every morning before her classes and going regularly to confession. Homework is then a rushed affair completed on the journey to school, and her handwriting suffers because of the motion of the tram. The teachers seem more concerned with presentation than with critical acumen. At home, too, her mother is guilty of reinforcing standardised sexual stereotypes by placing a disproportionate value on subjects like sewing:

«6! Tu as eu un 6 (ou un 4 ou un 3).

— C'est en couture.

— Mais c'est très important la couture. Tu dois savoir faire tes ourlets et coudre tes boutons. Vraiment, je me demande ce que nous ferons de toi. Une souillon.»

, (Cardinal, 1975: 98)

While the finishing school may succeed in turning out polite, acquiescent and well-groomed girls, skilled in the arts of housewifery, it does little to prepare them for other aspects of adulthood. Sex education is not dealt with in the curriculum, and as the narrator approaches adolescence her only source of information on how babies are made is the school playground, where facts are vague and often contradictory (136-137). Growing up in an environment where sex and all the vocabulary associated with it are taboo, and where masturbation is considered a sin (95), the narrator is not at ease with her body and her sexuality. It is only later through her writing, when she attempts to reclaim the words that

describe women's experiences, that she learns to reassess and appreciate femaleness and to liberate her culturally constructed body.

Discussing her education with Annie Leclerc in *Autrement dit*, Cardinal (1977: 59) explains that before becoming a writer she was very much the housewife and mother her education and upbringing had groomed her for. Her complaisance even influenced her choice of subject: 'Ce qui m'intéressait c'était les mathématiques. Et puis j'ai fait de la philo pour plaire à ma famille...' (Cardinal, 1977: 73). Cardinal intended to sit her *agrégation* so she could become a teacher but she had three children in four years and unfortunately each of them arrived just as exam time was approaching.

In a certain respect, the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* is like Josyane Rouvier in that initially she follows the route expected of her by her family and social class, but, unlike Josyane, she later utilises the skills learnt at school to her advantage. So although she has an extremely oppressive upbringing, her bourgeois education is certainly more beneficial than the education Josyane receives. Her aptitude for grammar gives her the confidence to put her thoughts down on paper because she knows she can structure a sentence correctly, and she gains inspiration from the writings of Flaubert, Plato and Sartre. Nonetheless, this traditional male-dominated syllabus contributes to her feeling of inferiority when it comes to writing down her own experiences as a woman:

J'avais pour les livres un trop grand respect, une trop grande vénération même pour imaginer que je puisse en faire un. Des livres tels que Madame Bovary, Les Dialogues de Platon, les romans et les essais de Sartre, ceux de Julien Gracq, certains bouquins des Américains et des Russes, avaient brûlé comme des feux de joie dans la nuit de mon adolescence et de mes années d'étude. [...]  
Le fait même d'écrire me semblait être un acte important dont je n'étais pas digne. Jamais ne m'était venue à l'esprit la prétention d'écrire. (Cardinal, 1975: 255)



Predictably, each time she wants a critique of her work she solicits a male point of view.<sup>19</sup> It is as if her education and upbringing have instilled in her such a low opinion of herself and of her sex that it is only when her work is approved of by a man that she is convinced of its value. In fact, she is so self-deprecating that she refers to 'mes pages', 'mes lignes', 'les gribouillis', 'mes carnets', 'ces feuillets' (263, 265, 267), until her husband, Jean-Pierre, shocks her by referring to her manuscript as a 'book' (268). It is only because of her confidence in his judgement that she proceeds to write. In fact, as with Beauvoir, all her intellectual support comes from men, from the psychoanalyst who helps open her eyes to the power of language, to Jean-Pierre who commends her literary ability, and finally to the publisher who accepts her manuscript.

Because of her demotivating education and upbringing, the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* does not recognise her talent for writing until she is in her thirties. However, *Une journée inutile* is an exception to this pattern. Brégeon's heroine Suzanne receives encouragement from her art tutor, Jean Blin, who she feels appreciates her talent:

Mon professeur Jean Blin lui me comprenait. [...] Il dit que je n'étais pas faite pour le mariage. Il a raison.

Il dit que j'étais faite pour me promener toujours pour ne rien faire [...] pour ne pas épouser Pierre et ne pas avoir Gisèle ni Paulo et pour dessiner et peindre de temps en temps quand j'en ai envie, pas la peine de me forcer je suis douée. [...] Il me tient pour un génie ou presque. [...] Il disait: Suzanne tu deviendras un grand artiste. [...] [Il] m'a regardée et a vu quelque chose. (Brégeon, 1966: 81-82)

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<sup>19</sup>When she writes some advertising copy for a dairy co-operative she seeks out the man she considers to be the most intelligent of the copywriters for his opinion before submitting. She is subsequently thrilled to be teasingly compared to the male prize-winner of the Goncourt.

· It is difficult to know whether Suzanne truly is a genius because she is not only egocentric but fanciful. She readily extols her own gifts and personal charm while denouncing everybody else around her including her husband and their two young children. *Une journée inutile* was Brégeon's first book and although it was relatively well-received by reviewers at the time for its portrayal of a housewife and mother who, for one day, decides to rebel by going on strike, the text is not well-known and is currently out of print. Brégeon's first person narrative is the interior monologue of a woman who wakes up one morning unable to face her daily routine: 'C'est plus fort que moi je ne me lèverai pas. [...] Je n'aime pas les gens, je n'aime pas mon mari, ni ma petite fille, ni mon petit garçon' (Brégeon, 1966: 7). Suzanne is profoundly discontented with her existence as a housewife and can find no pleasure in her role as wife to Pierre and mother to Gisèle and Paulo. Like Ernaux's narrator who is torn between working towards her *capés* and managing a home, Suzanne's frustration stems from her inability to reconcile her role as a wife and mother with her overwhelming desire to concentrate on her painting. So she decides to revolt against her situation by spending the whole day in bed, refusing to wash herself, refusing to wash the children, refusing to wash the dishes or the kitchen floor.

Temperamental by nature, Suzanne is both a self-centred, misunderstood artist and a dutiful wife and mother who loves and needs her family and feels guilty about staying in bed and neglecting them. Presumably she did have a promising future as an artist which she put aside at about the age of eighteen when she married Pierre and started a family. The references to authors she has read in the past, Jung and Freud (41, 53), or is currently attempting to read, for example, Huxley (39, 58) suggest she is cultured yet she remains at home while her husband pursues his career as a Russian teacher. Like the female protagonists of most of the other novels,<sup>20</sup> Suzanne finds that being a full-time housewife numbs her intellectually to the extent that she neglects her reading and her painting. More often than not she flicks through women's magazines rather than novels (32, 40, 119) and

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<sup>20</sup>Laurence, *Les Belles Images* (43); Monique, 'La Femme rompue' (211); Elise, *Elise ou la vraie vie* (25); Narrator, *La Femme gelée* (137).

she is convinced that her children's artistic scrawls measure up to her own attempts. Jean Blin evidently does not understand the pressures she faces as a housewife and mother of two small children:

[Jean Blin] se plaint que je ne fasse plus grand-chose mais où est-ce que je prendrais le temps? Il ne s'imagine pas. Et qu'est-ce que ça peut lui faire! Il ne sait pas que ce n'est plus pareil, ou s'il le sait il ne se rend pas compte, que j'ai des enfants, une fille et un garçon, et que ce sont eux qui dessinent et qui peignent à présent! [...] Et puis leurs dessins sont aussi bien que les miens, même mieux. Alors à quoi ça sert? (Brégeon, 1966: 80)

There are many similarities between the heroine of *Une journée inutile* and Monique of 'La Femme rompue'. Both have unplanned first pregnancies<sup>21</sup> and both put their ambitions on hold as a result, home and family taking precedence over any career plans. Suzanne tries to continue with her painting but she cannot fully devote herself to it when she has two small children to look after at the same time. When she does attempt a painting she is rarely satisfied with it because to paint successfully she needs to be relaxed and not distracted by the thought that she might be putting her children at risk.

The narrator of Ernaux's *La Femme gelée* is about thirty years old when she begins to reflect back on her life and attempt to fathom out how she gradually slipped into the role of housewife, homemaker, childminder, cook and cleaner. She considers all the factors that helped make her what she is, including her education. It is during her school days that she becomes conscious of alternative role models, quite unlike those at home. The soberly-dressed, middle-aged, unmarried women who make up the teaching staff at the narrator's school impress on the little girls the importance of virtue and chastity: 'Sachez-le, [...], on peut avoir dix partout et ne pas être agréable au bon Dieu' (Ernaux, 1981: 51).

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<sup>21</sup>See Brégeon, 1966: 30.

The heroine learns that pleasing God also entails putting yourself second and making sacrifices for the sake of others. During story time in class the pupils listen to tales of Saint Agnes, Joan of Arc, Maria Goretti and Bernadette. These characters are the role models chosen to drive home the message that God selected willing, uneducated handmaidens to undertake his divine mission. The cult of the Virgin Mary, who was glorified by accepting the subordinate role allotted to her, is thus reinforced. Self-effacement, humility and negation of self are shown to be preferable to confidence, ambition and exercise of the intellect, and the girls are encouraged to have a notebook in which to list any sacrifices they have made (56).

As in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, the elementary careers guidance at the narrator's school seems set on promoting conventional sex-roles and limiting the girls' future employment opportunities. It is expected that they will follow in the steps of their mothers, and become part of a working-class rural community. Although many of the girls have ambitions beyond marriage and motherhood, these alternatives are devalued by their teacher, Madame Sylvestre:

«Dites-moi mes petites filles, qu'est-ce que vous voulez faire plus tard. Fermière, oui, secrétaire, très bien tout ça.» [...] A moi elle m'a coupé la chique: «Tu seras épicière comme ta maman sûrement!» Je n'en revenais pas, moi qui croyais dire institutrice. Elle savait certainement mieux que moi. Tant pis. On passe à Marie-Paule, qui avait un sourire jusqu'aux oreilles, tranquille. «Et toi? — Moi je serais maman.» Les hurlements de rire, tout le monde, même les chochottes [...]. Terrible, la Sylvestre nous a arrêtées: «Taisez-vous petites sottes!» [...] «Maman, vous ne le savez pas, c'est le plus beau métier du monde!» Personne n'a bronché. Fermière, docteur, religieuse même il y avait eu, épicière, zéro tout ça. (Ernaux, 1981: 54-55)

Instead of spurring the girls on, Madame Sylvestre deflates any long term objectives they may have. By highlighting motherhood as the most noble vocation, the teacher is encouraging them to conform to a long-established and unvarying norm. Never would a class of boys be told to put fatherhood before a career, or that bringing up a child is a career in itself ('Papa, c'est le plus beau métier'). The heroine remarks that even the most demure little angels are aware that motherhood can hardly be construed as a 'job' — it is after all, unpaid. The teacher's discourse conflicts with all her mother has told her and she is thrown into confusion.

Contradictions abound in the education system described in *La Femme gelée*. The girls are taught that aiming for marriage and motherhood is the most worthy aspiration for a girl and to reinforce this they are encouraged to develop skills that will make them efficient wives and good parents. This is undermined, however, by the fact that the teachers upholding these values have chosen not to follow this path themselves. Furthermore, the role of the full-time housewife is devalued because of the low status of home economics classes: only girls who are deemed incapable of passing their school leaving certificate are relegated to these classes.

In the same way that the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire* is chastised for untidy work, the protagonist of *La Femme gelée* finds that much depends on neat presentation (57) and she is constantly reminded that outward cleanliness is extremely important because it is a reflection of the purity of the soul. Looking back on her Catholic education — 'ce rabâchage entendu pendant douze ans, qui exalte le don de soi et le sacrifice' (55) — the narrator concedes that, although she took some of the teaching on board, she also left some of it behind. She was too assertive to be coaxed into the submissive role endorsed by her teachers. Her defiance is tempered, however, by the sober realisation that it is difficult to erase years of inculcation, and to consign to the past the deep respect for the Virgin Mary

and the notion of motherhood she represents when it is so firmly embedded in the Catholic consciousness.

While Ernaux's heroine distances herself from the housewife image with her claims that 'Cuisine, repassage et couture ne sont pas des valeurs pour moi' (61), the books she reads as a young teenager are filled with traditional images of women. The heroine's sexual curiosity leads her to devour one romantic novel after another in an attempt to learn more about love and relationships. Later, these seem trivial when, studying for her *baccalauréat*, she is introduced to the writings of Camus and Sartre. But while the latter are of a superior literary quality, they hardly present stimulating and independent female characters. Nonetheless, the narrator finds them both refreshing and liberating, and through them she rediscovers her original love of learning and appetite for knowledge. Confident that the words and the sentiments she reads do not have a sex, she is not perturbed by the gender bias of the curriculum and feels able to identify with male protagonists like Roquentin and Meursault.

Anxious to pursue her studies beyond the *baccalauréat*, the narrator leaves her Catholic school and enters *la terminale* of a high school in Rouen to study philosophy. Here for the first time she realises that high school is not as egalitarian as she thought it would be. Her bourgeois classmates in Rouen wear navy blue blazers and well-cut suede jackets, and talk nonchalantly about *sciences po*, *hypokhâgne* and university: 'La fac, les filles de la classe font claquer le mot comme si leur place y était déjà retenue, pas pour moi' (100). The new school not only makes her aware of class inequalities, it is also where she first reads Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* and becomes more conscious of gender inequality. Deeply affected by the writer's vision of woman as 'other', she is determined that she will not get married or be treated as an object within a relationship (103).

While she feels able to make decisions about her personal relationships, she is not as clear-sighted when the time comes to make serious choices about her career, or about what to study at university. In this sense she is as blinkered as Rochefort's Josyane. The career options she initially considers — social work and teaching children with behavioural problems — are traditionally 'feminine', nurturing jobs, and although she briefly considers the medical and legal professions, she decides after much hesitation to register in the arts faculty. For the narrator, arts subjects are the default subjects, and not medicine or law.

Although there appears to be equality of the sexes within the faculty, the narrator soon encounters the 'sexual apartheid' alluded to by Baudelot and Estabiet in *Allez les filles!*: 'Je découvre qu'il existe des études pour femmes et des études pour hommes, «la littérature, les langues, rien que des nanas», j'entends ce mot pour la première fois aussi. «Pour un homme il vaut mieux faire des sciences», c'est une fille qui me l'assure' (Ernaux, 1981: 108). Not only do men outnumber women in the scientific subjects but their presence is felt strongly in the arts subjects, where on more than one occasion provocative analogies are drawn between the act of writing and the penis: '«La création littéraire ressemble à une éjaculation», prof de lettres, cours sur Péguy, «tous les critiques sont des impuissants», assistant de philo' (108). It could be argued that this insensitive use of language puts women in a situation which is not conducive to learning, but at this stage, the narrator merely records the sexist bias of the lectures. Unlike Letessier's politicised heroine Loïca, who condemns sex discrimination, Ernaux's narrator does not feel marginalised by the non-inclusive language of her tutors, nor does she object when male students refer to female students as 'nanas' or 'boudins'. As an unattached woman within the relatively egalitarian framework of the university, she is too busy enjoying the independence that comes with student life to see men as anything other than study companions.

We have seen earlier that when she gets married things start to change. Initially, married life is agreeable but it is not long before she and her husband each slip into

stereotypical sex roles. Even though they are both working hard in order to finish their studies, it is the narrator who must get up from her books to turn down the pressure cooker, while he continues with his reading (130). The situation is reminiscent of that described in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*. The narrator of *La Femme gelée* even begins to think she will never get her teaching diploma because her concentration is so frequently interrupted with making mental shopping lists and plans for the evening meal. Her husband, on the other hand, advances more rapidly than ever with his degree. He benefits from his wife's unpaid labour: his meals are provided for him, his clothes are laundered and he is given unlimited moral support. Although he gives his wife plenty of verbal encouragement to persevere with her work, like Maurice (of 'La Femme rompue') before him, he simply does not back this up with the practical support she needs.

Through nearly all of these autobiographical fictions, education and self-fulfilment are simply not judged to be as vital for a woman as they are for a man. When the narrator learns that her mother-in-law did a biology degree and taught for a short while until she met her husband and started a family, she is deeply saddened at the thought that a bright future thrown aside: 'Tout le monde l'admirait, ses fils, ses belles-filles, de s'être consacrée à l'éducation de ses enfants, au bonheur de son mari, on ne pensait pas qu'elle aurait pu vivre autrement' (136).

The narrator continues with her studies despite the pressures and ultimately gets her teaching qualification, but her sense of triumph is diminished by the guilt she feels at putting their baby son in a crèche during the last two months of intensive studying. Now for the first time Ernaux openly raises the problematics of language. The narrator is forced to concede that 'éducation' is one of those words, like 'maison', 'nourriture' and 'travail' (149), that carries quite different implications for her husband. For him, education was a ticket to self-fulfilment, economic advancement and mental stimulus. For the female narrator it should have been the same. Instead, she is trapped in a socially-defined sex role. After a wonderfully



invigorating time at university devoted to reading, self-improvement, acquisition of knowledge and self-exploration, she is demoralised by having to abandon her own desires and stay at home full-time as a mother and housekeeper. Glumly confronted with the harsh reality of her domestic responsibilities, she realises that she was far too hasty to reject the cautions of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, when she blithely thought it was 'complètement à côté de la plaque' (129).

## UPBRINGING AND SOCIALISATION

### I. Parental influence

Beauvoir's firm belief that female identity is culturally and not biologically determined, and that girls are taught gendered values from birth is neatly summarised in the first words of volume II of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949: 13) 'on ne naît pas femme: on le devient'. In the chapter *Enfance*, the informal education provided by parents is shown to play an important part in the socialisation of the female child. The little girl's apprenticeship for life at that time is very different from that of her brothers. They are left free to climb trees and play boisterous games, but she is treated very much like a 'poupée vivante' (Beauvoir, 1949, vol. II: 30), and is dressed in impractical, frilly clothes which must be kept clean.<sup>22</sup> She is taught that she must aim to please, she is trained in the feminine arts: cooking, sewing and housekeeping, and she learns the importance of personal grooming. Beauvoir stresses that the manner in which a girl is brought up determines how she perceives herself, her relationship to others and her function in society. From the toys she is given, to the roles she sees acted out by her parents, the girl ascertains what her future responsibilities are to be:

Il n'y a aucun «instinct maternel» inné et mystérieux. La fillette constate que le soin des enfants revient à la mère, on le lui enseigne; récits entendus, livres lus, toute sa

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<sup>22</sup>This is the way Laurence is brought up in *Les Belles Images*.

petite expérience le confirme; on l'encourage à s'enchanter de ces richesses futures, on lui donne des poupées pour qu'elles prennent d'ores et déjà un aspect tangible. Sa «vocation» lui est impérieusement dictée. (Beauvoir, 1949, vol. II: 33)

Although Beauvoir is writing about what it means to be a child in the late 1940s, Rochefort's incisive description of 1950s France in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, shows that little has changed with regard to the conditioning of female children. Josyane has her vocation impressed upon her at an early age by her mother and by local women :

Tout le monde disait que j'aimais beaucoup mes frères et sœurs, que j'étais une vraie petite maman. Les bonnes femmes me voyaient passer, poussant Catherine, tirant Chantal, battant le rappel des garçons, et elles disaient à ma mère que j'étais «une vraie petite maman». (Rochefort, 1961: 12)

Instead of deterring Josyane from following in their footsteps, her mother and the other women in the community positively encourage her to have a family of her own, even though it is a situation about which they do nothing but grumble. Indeed, as far as Josyane can see, motherhood is synonymous with permanent weariness and intractable gynaecological problems. However, she is not taught to draw critical inferences from their fatigue and boredom. Beauvoir unveils her own theory on why women put pressure on their daughters to marry and have children in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. In her dissection of the relationship and the continuity between mother and daughter, she claims that the mother forces her own fate upon the daughter as a means of both reclaiming her femininity and revenging herself for it:

On trouve le même processus chez les pédérastes, les joueurs, les drogués, chez tous ceux qui à la fois se flattent d'appartenir à une certaine confrérie et en sont humiliés: ils essaient avec un ardent prosélytisme de gagner des adeptes. Ainsi, les

femmes, quand une enfant leur est confiée, s'attachent, avec un zèle où l'arrogance se mélange à la rancune, à la transformer en une femme semblable à elles.

(Beauvoir, 1949, vol. II: 31)

As if motherhood were a religious calling, women become hostile to anyone who has a different ideology. This point is upheld by Halimi in *Le Lait de l'oranger* and *La Cause des femmes*.<sup>23</sup> Halimi feels that her mother, who had an oppressive upbringing followed by marriage at fifteen and a child at sixteen, subconsciously wanted to see her daughter endure the same fate because she was both proud of her martyrdom and too feeble to struggle against it:

Opprimée dès son plus jeune âge, niée dans son existence, passant sans transition, de la terrible autorité de mon grand-père, authentique paterfamilias de tribu, à celle de mon père, son mari, tout naturellement, elle opprimait à son tour.

Quand je refusais de me marier, à seize ans, elle me disait: «À ton âge, moi j'avais des enfants.» À travers moi, elle voulait revivre sa vie. Comme pour la justifier. Je comprends très bien cette démarche. Perpétuer des choses provoque toujours

' moins de heurts que vouloir les changer. (Halimi, 1992: 25-26)

There is no indication in her books that Halimi feels resentment towards her mother for the way in which she was raised. However, later texts show rebellion. Letessier's protagonist Loïca feels repulsed by her mother's acceptance of her role as victim. When she returns home for a visit to find that her mother, Madeleine, has been viciously beaten up by her father, she shows little compassion. There are contradictions between Loïca's principles as a union representative and her actions. She campaigns for the weak in the factory but her own mother's lack of assertiveness frustrates her, and when she sees the evidence of her father's violence her immediate reaction is to distance herself: 'Madeleine dégage son

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<sup>23</sup>*La Cause des femmes* was first published in 1973 by Éditions Bernard Grasset but my page references are from the revised 1992 Gallimard edition.

cou, Loïca a un geste de répulsion, leurs histoires sordides continuent, leur haine, leur misère. Elle aurait voulu ne plus jamais les voir' (Letessier, 1983: 130). When she subsequently hears that her mother is prepared to take her alcoholic husband back, rather than let him spend the rest of his days in a psychiatric hospital, Loïca is filled with revulsion: '[Loïca] a envie d'insulter Madeleine, de la rouer de coups, de crever cette baudruche lamentable qui prétend l'avoir enfantée' (Letessier, 1983: 131). To make her own destiny, she must cut herself loose from her mother.

The heroine of Etcherelli's *Un arbre voyageur* lacks Loïca's strength of mind and continues in her mother's footsteps. During the flashback section of the novel, the reader learns about Milie's origins and working-class background. Milie is an unplanned baby and her father's identity is never revealed. Born in her grandfather's house in Brunoy, Milie remains in his care when her mother is forced to return to Paris to find work. So like Etcherelli herself, Milie is raised by her grandfather. He has ambitions for his granddaughter, but Milie's mother, having worked as a waitress since she was seventeen, feels obliged to warn Milie of the future ahead of her as a woman. Her fatalism is the enemy of liberty and self-realisation:

Dépositaire d'une vérité transmise par les femmes dont elle vient, il lui faut maintenant léguer ce savoir à Milie. La préparer à son destin: l'homme fait pour courir, la femme pour souffrir, arriver 'entière' au mariage, tenir un homme, être femme ou mère, interminable litanie qui trace le sillon douloureux vers lequel, inéluctablement, il faut marcher. (Etcherelli, 1978: 156)

When she goes to school, Milie, just like Emma Bovary, is convinced by the books she reads that true love can save her from such a destiny. She meets Georges and falls in love but when she becomes pregnant he offers her little support. When she finally plucks up the courage to tell her mother that she is expecting a baby there is a moment of deep

sadness as if all her mother's worst fears are realised. Milie has not learnt from her mother's mistakes — she has repeated them:

Quand elle a fini, celle-ci s'assied, cherche sa respiration. En un grand chant de douleur, sa bouche laisse échapper la plainte d'une vie saccagée. Mille femmes, un long cortège remontant jusqu'à elle, soufflent ces mots que Milie écoute déchirée. Elle prend ce soir sa place dans la chaîne et se voit au centre d'un tourbillon de malheur qui l'a saisie et ne la lâchera plus. (Etcherelli, 1978: 163)

Mother-daughter dynamics are a frequent source of debate in contemporary feminist theory. The strong identification between a mother and daughter is examined in Adrienne Rich's powerful work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. In this text she observes how the relation between mother and daughter engenders a cycle of repetition, where a daughter's understanding of the world is learnt through her mother, who inevitably passes down her own strengths and weaknesses: 'A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman' (Rich, 1977: 243). Rich stresses that it is an absolute requisite to break this pattern of guilt and self-hatred if women are to make any progress at all. Daughters need positive role models, mothers who are proud of being female and who want success and freedom for themselves as well as for their daughters, because 'The quality of the mother's life [...] is her primary bequest to her daughter' (247). At the end of *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, we learn that the young couple are hoping for a girl rather than a boy because, 'En effet, c'est plus pratique' (Rochefort, 1961: 159). It echoes the remark made by Josyane's mother to her baby daughter: 'Et vivement que tu grandisses, [...] que tu puisses m'aider un peu' (12). Sadly, it would seem that Josyane's 'primary bequest' to her own daughter will show scant improvement on the legacy she received herself.

In many respects, Josyane's upbringing is the antithesis of the upbringing recounted in *La Femme gelée*. Ernaux's narrator is brought up to believe that being female is not an impediment or a cross to be borne. Her female relatives are strong-willed, characterful, working-class women whose homes are well lived-in spaces where the dust is allowed to accumulate. Certainly, the older generation have known hardship: the narrator's grandmother speaks regretfully of missed opportunities, yet these stories are generally told as a warning to younger members of the family: 'Pas besoin d'un dessin pour savoir très tôt que les gosses, les poulots comme tout le monde disait autour de moi, c'était la vraie débîne, la catastrophe absolue' (Ernaux, 1981: 12).

Compared with Rochefort's female characters who are troubled with difficult pregnancies, cancers and prolapsed wombs, Ernaux's women sparkle with vitality, and although they are hard-working they still make time for sensual pleasures, even if it is only washing down the dregs of the coffee cup with a nip of brandy. To a certain extent, the status of the women in Ernaux's novel is enhanced because of the rural setting. Rural households are far more likely to produce some of the goods they consume, and since women frequently participate in this home-based economic activity, gender roles are not so strongly delineated. The narrator's own family, for example, runs a café and a small shop and both parents manage the business. In the urban setting of *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, on the other hand, sexual hierarchy is more apparent because household and paid workplace are separate. Consequently, husband and wife have very distinct roles: one is homemaker and the other is breadwinner.

Of all the role models in *La Femme gelée*, the narrator's mother is the most influential. Her strength, her assertiveness and her motivation help the narrator construct a positive female identity for herself: 'Comment, à vivre auprès d'elle, ne serais-je persuadée qu'il est glorieux d'être une femme, même, que les femmes sont supérieures aux hommes' (15). From her mother she inherits a love of reading and an ability to spend hours curled up

with a novel or magazine, whether it is *Jane Eyre*, *The Grapes of Wrath* or the problem pages in the women's press. A bond and a mutual understanding exist between mother and daughter, based on their fondness for the written word. As an adult, the narrator questions whether her early perusal of *romans à l'eau de rose*, where marriage is always the supreme ambition of the heroines, influenced her decision to rush into marriage on the strength of a Camus quotation.<sup>24</sup> But ultimately she decides that the scornful remarks made by her father and her husband such as, 'tu fais du roman, tu as trop d'imagination ma pauvre fille' (26) were more detrimental to her than her mother's taste for romantic novels. Like Beauvoir's parents, the narrator's mother was always happier to see her daughter caught up in a book than burdened with household chores: 'Elle préférait me voir lire, parler toute seule dans mes jeux, écrire des histoires dans mes cahiers de classe de l'année d'avant plutôt que ranger ma chambre et broder interminablement un napperon' (27).

The narrator's childhood does not even remotely resemble Beauvoir's descriptions of girlhood in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Far from being a 'poupée vivante', the narrator wears clothes chosen for their comfort and durability. Instead of a tight-fitting belt, her mother opts for 'Des bretelles, qu'elle soit à l'aise' (33). And as for childhood games, the narrator is more interested in climbing, stealing fruit and playing hide and seek than in dolls and tea sets: 'Oser, le grand mot, chiche que t'oses pas, sonner à la porte de la mère Lefebvre, dire ça tout haut, montrer ton, faucher la pêche (35).

The narrator's mother, in stark contrast to the mother in *Les Mots pour le dire*, is unperturbed by low marks in sewing. She pays far more attention to the marks for grammar and mathematics: 'Le samedi elle fait le compte des dix en dictée et en calcul mais ne moufte pas devant l'inévitable quatre en couture et le passable en conduite' (38). Having

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<sup>24</sup>See Ernaux, 1981: 121-122 'Brusquement il a dit: "C'est de Camus ça, aimer un être c'est accepter de vieillir avec lui. Une phrase juste. Tu ne trouves pas?" J'ai le souffle retenu. "On devrait se marier, qu'est-ce que tu en penses?" Cette mollesse qui me liquéfie subitement dans mon fauteuil de rotin, ma joie inavouable masquée d'un "il faut qu'on y réfléchisse", je m'en souviens. [...] Elle resplendissait d'une poésie lointaine, délicate, la petite phrase de Camus. Vieillir ensemble, comme une grâce qui fondait sur moi d'un seul coup, pas une once de pensée claire.'

both grown up in large, working-class families, the parents of Ernaux's narrator left school at twelve, at which point her mother started work at a margarine factory, her father at a farm as a labourer. Fuelled by a desire to make something of their lives, they took out a loan after they were married and bought the café near Yvetot, where their only child was born. Unlike Madame Rouvier in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* and Marie-Line's mother in *Loïca* — 'et ma mère qui m'avait toujours dit que bête comme je suis je finirais ouvrière!' <sup>25</sup> — Ernaux's narrator's mother had high aspirations for her daughter which she expresses with vulgar vigour:

[Ma mère] Voulait une fille qui ne prendrait pas comme elle le chemin de l'usine, qui dirait merde à tout le monde, aurait une vie libre, et l'instruction était pour elle ce merde et cette liberté. Alors ne rien exiger de moi qui puisse m'empêcher de réussir, pas de petits services et d'aide ménagère où s'enlise l'énergie. Ce qui compte c'est que cette réussite-là ne m'ait pas été interdite parce que j'étais une fille. (Ernaux, 1981: 39)

There are many similarities between Beauvoir's own experiences of growing up, as told in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, and the childhood evocations of Ernaux's *La Femme gelée*. Neither grew up with the sense that being born a girl was in any way disadvantageous, neither was burdened with domestic chores while at school, and neither had a brother. Both Beauvoir and Ernaux's narrator pinpoint the absence of a male sibling as an important factor in their development, in that it ruled out the possibility of discrimination within the family.

However, Halimi's upbringing in a staunchly traditional Jewish family is quite different. The first chapter of *La Cause des femmes* begins with the staggering circumstances surrounding the author's birth. For two whole weeks following the arrival of

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<sup>25</sup>Marie-Line is one of Loïca's female colleagues in the factory. See Letessier, 1983: 54.



the new baby, Gisèle's father, Édouard, pretended to enquiring friends that his wife had not yet given birth, such was his disappointment and embarrassment at having had a daughter instead of another son. It was hearing the story of her birth that first triggered off in Gisèle a desire to fight against injustices and discriminatory practices of all kinds:

J'étais toute gosse quand on m'a raconté l'histoire de ma naissance. [Les détails] m'ont poursuivie longtemps et continuent de me poursuivre. Ils me disaient la , malédiction d'être née femme. Comme un glas, et en même temps comme un appel, un départ. Je crois que la révolte s'est levée très tôt en moi. Très dure, très violente. Sans aucun doute indispensable pour faire face à ce clivage que j'ai retrouvé dans toute ma vie: j'étais une femme dans un monde pour hommes. (Halimi, 1992: 24)

In the same way that one sex is allowed more freedom than the other in the Rouvier household (*Les Petits Enfants du siècle*), Gisèle and her sister are brought up in a different manner to their brothers. As far as Gisèle's parents are concerned, a son continues the lineage and brings honour to the family, whereas a daughter represents an overwhelming responsibility, and the sooner a husband is found, the better. For this reason sons are given priority in every area, especially in education:

«Toi, tu es une fille. Il faut que tu apprennes la cuisine, le ménage. Et tu te marieras, le plus vite possible. Lui, c'est un garçon. Il faut — on en trouvera les moyens, à tout prix — qu'il fasse des études, qu'il gagne bien sa vie». (Halimi, 1992: 24-25)

, The favouritism shown by Gisèle's parents towards her unmotivated older brother, and the sacrifices the family is forced to make to enable him to get his diploma fill her with resentment. But realising that she will get no financial help from her parents and anxious to

get a place at the fee-paying high school, she concentrates all her energies on winning a scholarship, which she attains with flying colours. However, like Josyane in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, her success at school invariably goes unnoticed at home: 'J'arrivais pour dire: «Je suis première en français.» C'était le moment même où se déclenchait un drame parce que mon frère était dernier en mathématiques. Il était homme et son avenir d'homme occupait toute la place. À en être asphyxiée' (Halimi, 1992: 30).

What sets Gisèle apart from Josyane, however, is that she is ruthlessly ambitious and prepared to go to any lengths in order to achieve her aim, which is to defend her own rights and the rights of others. Her single-mindedness and tenacity are such that, while still a child, she goes on hunger strike to protest against the unfair division of labour within the household:

Mise en quarantaine, enfermée dans mon silence, isolée par celui des autres, je n'hésitais pas, à dix ans, à me lancer dans une grève de faim illimitée. Je refusais alors de souscrire aux obligations des filles de la maison, ménage, vaisselle, service des hommes de la famille. (Halimi, 1988: 15)

The author's childhood is characterised by rebellion. She queries every convention, every rule and every restriction imposed on her because of her sex. In Judaism and in Christianity, the ideological framework that dictates the dichotomy is shown to be particularly oppressive for our heroines. Gisèle soon begins to question the religious beliefs her family expect her to accept and uphold. She thinks it unreasonable that women and girls are excluded from certain rites and ceremonies, and demands to know why every Jewish man begins his daily prayers 'Béni soit l'Éternel, qui ne m'a point fait femme' (Halimi, 1988: 26). In the same way that Ernaux's narrator is taught at her Catholic school to put faith in God first, academic achievement second, Gisèle's mother tells her that good marks depend more

on God's will than on diligence, and that to earn God's grace the *mezouza*<sup>26</sup> must be kissed regularly, especially before an exam. Defiantly, Gisèle one day decides to put this absurd theory to the test by running off to school without paying homage to the *mezouza*. She is both relieved and gratified to find that she is not struck down, and from this point on she feels one step nearer to her liberation.

## II. Sex education and taboos

Sex education is a topic that is avoided in the Halimi household. Gisèle's questions are either deflected, touched upon superficially or answered with untruths. The commencement of her periods marks a brutal turning point in her life. Her mother's evasive prevarications on the facts of life leave Gisèle totally baffled. Overnight she is thrust into a world of bizarre rituals: sanitary towels are soaked in concealed chamber pots, washed furtively at night, and hung out where no-one might come across them. To be suddenly part of a secret and taboo club, barred from playing with boys and made to withdraw from her usual activities is hard for Gisèle to comprehend:

Ma mère m'a dit: «Quand tu seras *indisposée*, tu ne pourras plus te baigner.»  
Pendant longtemps, j'ai obéi. Un jour, je me suis brusquement demandé: «Mais pourquoi est-ce que je ne me baignerais pas? Pourquoi me couper du monde, de mes activités, de ce qui fait ma vie? Pourquoi vivre à l'écart, tous les mois, à cette période?» Et gaillardement, je décidai désormais de me baigner — sans rien en dire à mes parents, bien entendu. Jusqu'au jour où, après une longue journée passée à la jetée, ma mère ôta mes chaussures et découvrit du sable sous mes  
, semelles... Je fus battue. (Halimi, 1992: 37)

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<sup>26</sup>A *mezouza* is a case fixed to the doorpost of a Jewish house that contains a piece of parchment inscribed with verses from Deuteronomy.

One can imagine how psychologically crippling it must be for a girl to cope with the onset of puberty and her awakening sexuality in an environment where women are considered as unclean or impure. Gisèle's female relatives deliberately segregate themselves from their husbands when they are menstruating. Her grandmother goes as far as sleeping on a mat in the corner of the bedroom, allowing Gisèle's grandfather to occupy the whole bed.<sup>27</sup> However, Gisèle is rational and self-assertive and this repressive background simply reinforces her determination to combat the low status of women:

Malgré cela, au fond de moi-même, je ne me trouvais ni impure, ni inférieure.

Pourtant, on me traitait comme telle. C'était donc cela l'oppression. J'étais une victime.

Mais attention! Une victime n'est pas forcément passive. Cette oppression qui pesait sur moi, je l'ai assumée. J'ai choisi mon camp, je me suis volontairement mise du côté des opprimés et des victimes! Mon oppression devint alors révolte, combat ouvert. (Halimi, 1992: 39)

The taboo surrounding menstruation is an issue explored by several of the authors I am discussing.<sup>28</sup> In Letessier's *Loïca*, the heroine's mother explains briefly that periods are a fate a woman has to endure (Letessier, 1983: 22-23). Like Gisèle, Loïca does not regard female biology as an unfortunate destiny. She rejoices in her menstrual blood and rejects the idea that to be born a woman is a curse. On the other hand the narrator of Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire*, inherits from her mother a deep dislike of her own body. The damaging effects of her upbringing, and in particular, her relationship with her mother, are shown to be the cause of her later psychiatric illness and problematic vaginal bleeding.

<sup>27</sup> Adrienne Rich points out that it is still believed that a Jewish woman having intercourse with her husband during her period may cause him to be killed in war (see Rich, 1977: 106).

<sup>28</sup> See Lainé, 1974: 32 on menstrual taboos: 'Presque toutes les cultures, de même, attribuent au sang menstruel une valeur magique, éventuellement une puissance maléfique si l'on n'observe pas les tabous qui s'y rattachent. La conscience moderne — et qui plus est la conscience féminine — n'est pas à l'abri de telles superstitions (nombreuses sont les femmes qui prétendent que la menstruation les empêcherait de réussir une mayonnaise, note Evelyne Sullerot [*La Femme dans le monde moderne*]).'

in Cardinal's novel, the protagonist's upbringing is strict and pious: even her creator's name is the same as that of the Catholic symbol of female purity and perfection, the Virgin Mary. Her mother spends a great deal of time instilling in her an obsession with personal hygiene, while outspoken or violent behaviour is deemed unfeminine and is severely chastised (Cardinal, 1975: 247-248). As for sex education, her mother makes it clear that women's role in society is a reproductive and nurturing one:

«Tu sais bien que le rôle des femmes est non seulement de mettre des enfants au monde mais aussi de les élever dans l'amour du Seigneur... Dieu nous soumet à des épreuves que nous devons accepter avec joie car elles nous rendent dignes de nous approcher de lui... Tu te trouves devant la première de ces épreuves puisque tu vas bientôt avoir tes règles». (Cardinal, 1975: 137)

Like Gisèle, Cardinal's narrator was also an unwanted baby, but what makes her different is that she was the result of a failed abortion. The discovery that her mother never wanted her is even more upsetting because of the cruel way in which she is told in a busy, dirty street. It is only after seven years of psychoanalysis that she is able to recognise that her mother's own illness prevented her from seeing the harm she was inflicting on her daughter:

Là, dans la rue, en quelques phrases, elle a crevé mes yeux, elle a percé mes tympan, elle a arraché mon scalp, elle a coupé mes mains, elle a cassé mes genoux, elle a torturé mon ventre, elle a mutilé mon sexe.

Je sais aujourd'hui qu'elle était inconsciente du mal qu'elle me faisait et je ne la hais plus. Elle chassait sa folie sur moi, je lui servais d'holocauste. (Cardinal, 1975: 164)

Her attempt to come to terms with and understand her mother's misdirected hatred is developed further in *Le Passé empiété*. In this text, Cardinal identifies the legacy of suppressed emotion passed from mother to daughter, which serves only to perpetuate female passivity and powerlessness. She describes how the initiation to womanhood her mother received from her grandmother took the form of a few feebly-whispered words on the former's wedding night, «Laisse-toi faire, ce n'est qu'un mauvais moment à passer» (Cardinal, 1983: 195). Cardinal is able to break this cycle of repetition because her personal therapy gives her the self-confidence to confront her own past and allow her feelings of anger to surface. Consequently, a main feature of her writing is a preoccupation with free expression and its therapeutic value, and a determination to reclaim the taboo words — *les mots pour le dire* — which describe women's experiences.

### III. Peer and social pressures

It is not only parents and teachers who exert social pressures on girls as they are growing up: friends or other family members can play an important part in influencing a girl's academic and cultural trajectory. Where a parent has not inculcated a female child, peers will often ensure that she is indoctrinated with her vocation. Josyane in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* has a positive role model in her friend Ethel. Ethel, like Gisèle in *La Cause des femmes*, has a lucid plan for her future: she wants to become a teacher so as to give children a better start in life. Ethel can see Josyane's intellectual potential and tries to encourage her friend to continue with her education, but at this stage Josyane is drained of ambition, and is facing the future with a mixture of indecisiveness and apathy: '[Ethel] aurait voulu m'aider, me prêter des livres, mais ça aurait servi à quoi? De toute façon je n'y avais plus la tête, j'étais hors de coup maintenant' (Rochefort, 1961: 131).

Like Suzanne of *Une journée inutile*, who questions the point of continuing with her painting, Josyane cannot see the value of pursuing with her studies when she will never have the opportunity to use the knowledge and skills acquired. It could be argued that Josyane is only being realistic. Ethel is convinced that socialism is the answer, just as Beauvoir was until the stirrings of the women's movement in the 1970s persuaded her otherwise. As far as Josyane is concerned, Ethel's vision represents an impossible utopian dream, and as they become older, their political and emotional differences become more apparent and they grow apart. Because of her sexual experience, Josyane considers herself to be more mature than Ethel, yet her sexual maturity does not protect her from unplanned pregnancy. In fact, her source of information about sex and pregnancy is another friend, Liliane, who tragically dies after undergoing a backstreet abortion.

Ernaux's narrator in *La Femme gelée* is very much influenced by her friend, Brigitte. Brigitte resembles Liliane more than Ethel in that she seems to know all there is to know about boys and make-up and *ça* (Ernaux, 1981: 70). Her demure manners, her manicured hands and her impeccable style of dress as well as the slight age difference make her a fascinating role model for the impressionable adolescent. Under Brigitte's critical eye, Ernaux's narrator develops a heightened awareness of her physical attributes and her failings:

Pas un pouce du corps qui échappait à sa sagacité, pas un orteil à bouger librement, des jambes à croiser, un rire à laisser partir sans penser à rien. Me rappelait tout le temps à l'ordre: «Les poils aux pattes c'est pas beau. Tu devrais mettre du vernis sur tes ongles de pieds. On te voit trop les cuisses quand tu t'assois». (Ernaux, 1981: 68)

Brigitte also manages to transform positive role models into aberrant ones by drawing the narrator's attention to the anomalous division of labour within her parents' home:

L'époque Brigitte a été fatale pour ma mère, son image glorieuse en a pris un drôle de coup. [...] Introduite dans mon intimité familiale, Brigitte me fait voir ce que j'avais senti jusqu'ici sans y attacher d'importance. Non, ma mère ne sait pas cuisiner, même pas la mayonnaise, le ménage ne l'intéresse pas, et elle n'est pas «féminine».

[...]

Je n'arrive pas à persuader Brigitte que c'est sans importance, et plutôt pratique pour le commerce ce partage des tâches. Un homme popote ça alors. Et du coup tous les deux ridicules, la gentillesse de mon père se transforme en faiblesse, le dynamisme de ma mère en port de culotte. Ça m'est venu la honte qu'il se farcisse la vaisselle, honte qu'elle gueule sans retenue. (Ernaux, 1981: 75)

Brigitte makes far more of an impression on Ernaux's narrator than Ethel makes on Josyane. This is perhaps because during puberty a tentative suggestion that higher education might be preferable to leaving school from a girl who is described as rather serious and not really interested in boys (Rocheport, 1961: 131) is not as persuasive as Brigitte's «tu t'es mis ta jupe plissée aujourd'hui [...] ça te fait des grosses jambes» (Ernaux, 1981: 67).

As the narrator of *La Femme gelée* becomes increasingly preoccupied with her appearance, and with finding and securing a boyfriend, education and career prospects slide further down on the scale of importance. Aspiring to be the object of someone's gaze, she casts herself as a passive victim. Her earlier intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm are temporarily replaced by a desire not to stand out academically from her classmates. This is mainly due to the fact that 'swots' are unpopular with the opposite sex, but also because she intuitively feels that boys cannot see beyond their own masculine universe and feel intimidated by girls who are too ambitious:



Ils n'imaginent pas qu'on puisse avoir aussi notre monde, mes histoires, la classe, les copines [...]. Envie de leur parler des maths si durs, du français que j'aime, Rousseau par exemple, ça les ennuie, et les problèmes d'algèbre des filles ne valent pas ceux des garçons. [...] Ils me charrient quand je veux rentrer pour travailler, il faudra s'y faire, à ce qu'aucun garçon, aucun homme pendant longtemps, hormis , mon père, n'attache de l'importance à ce que je fais. Entendre sans sourciller, institutrice? tu resteras vieille fille, avocate, t'as pas les chevilles qui enflent?

(Ernaux, 1981: 89)

From early on in her life then, Ernaux's narrator discovers that boys talk more than they listen, and that girls must play a subservient game of flattery: 'Toujours à parler d'eux, leurs goûts, leurs cours et leurs colles, leur scooter et leurs couilles. Ecouter les hommes, leur être attentive, ça commence' (88-89). The effects of growing up in an environment where a boy's intellectual development and ambition are considered more important than a girl's are also subtly highlighted in Etcherelli's *Elise ou la vraie vie*.

What is initially striking in *Elise ou la vraie vie* is Elise's total admiration for her brother and the lack of interest she has in her own future. All that is mentioned of her education is that some of her time was spent at a hostel run by nuns, where she developed '[son] goût des fleurs, des napperons brodés, des teints pâles et de l'âme propre' (Etcherelli, 1967: 11). The only role model she has is her grandmother, a modest, poorly-educated woman who scrapes a living as a cleaner. Having left school at sixteen, Elise earns a little money taking in typing, so that Lucien might have the opportunity to continue with his education. Unlike Gisèle in *La Cause des femmes* and *Le Lait de l'oranger*, Elise puts aside any thoughts of a career for herself, and is content to make sacrifices so that things run more smoothly for her brother: 'Je n'avais ni vocation ni ambition. Je rêvais de me sacrifier pour Lucien. Personne ne me guidait et je me jugeais favorisée en comparaison des filles de mon quartier qui, à quinze ans, prenaient le chemin de l'usine' (12).

It is not until Elise reaches her late twenties that her critical self-awareness begins to surface. Her *prise de conscience* is triggered when she comes across some political books and left-wing newspapers that Lucien has left in the house, and in the course of reading this material it dawns on her that the world she has been living in up until now is not necessarily 'la vraie vie'<sup>29</sup>: 'Avec une logique terrible, ces écrits dénonçaient tout ce qui m'avait paru naturel' (26). For Lucien, these political books are liberating and exciting, but for Elise, the words she reads reinforce the bleakness of her situation as a prisoner within her four walls:

Je lisais et se levaient les voiles épais. C'était une impression pareille à la musique. Me délier, comprendre, pénétrer au milieu des mots, suivre la phrase et sa logique, savoir. Je ressentais une satisfaction physique, je fermais les yeux de plaisir. [...] J'enviais Lucien de courir les bibliothèques. (Etcherelli, 1967: 25)

• Suddenly, she begins to see things in a different light and devours every political article she can lay her hands on in an attempt to make up for lost time and the shortcomings of her education. The more she reads, the more she develops emotionally and intellectually, and the more she differentiates herself from Marie-Louise, her brother's wife, who reads only women's magazines: 'Courrier du cœur, conseils aux épouses, comment garder un mari, recettes de beauté...' (33). As in the other novels, there is a dichotomy between those heroines who read the female press and those who read Camus and Sartre. As the narrative progresses, the boundaries of Elise's world extend beyond the home and she becomes interested in national and international events, anxiously following the war in Indo-China, 'a war she once thought of as 'une guerre lointaine, discrète, aux causes imprécises' (21). Elise's intellectual and political awareness unfortunately comes too late for her to achieve her full potential and avoid taking the road to the factory, but her reading, her experience of factory life and her involvement with Arezki is an education in itself, and gives

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<sup>29</sup>'La vraie vie' is polyvalent. See pp. 22, 33, 49, 59, 60, 98, 167, 274.

her the opportunity to escape the inhibiting atmosphere of her grandmother's house and see beyond the small-mindedness of a provincial town.

In the texts by Beauvoir, Rochefort, Halimi, Cardinal, Brégeon, Etcherelli and Ernaux, which depict a range of social and cultural milieus, we have seen that few of the teachers or educators, and even fewer of the parents, instil any proper sense of ambition or direction in their female charges, with often highly deleterious consequences. From a very young age girls are taught to put family responsibilities first and are expected to help with domestic chores, whereas boys are allowed their freedom and encouraged to be forward-thinking and ambitious. Schools focus on learning by rote, and privilege male interests by encouraging girls to regard marriage and motherhood as their supreme ambition. Unlike their male counterparts, little girls are brainwashed by lectures on cleanliness, personal hygiene and chastity. Religious education, especially, is shown to be utterly pernicious with its menstrual taboos and emphasis on humility and submission to God's will. Lacking practical guidance and starved of positive role models, many of the female protagonists choose to abdicate all intellectual responsibility by enacting the roles prescribed for them by patriarchy. Most of the novels evince a pattern of defeatism: the protagonists abandon further education and self-fulfilment, and resign themselves to taking the easier option because of social or familial pressures. Beauvoir is convinced of her intellectual inferiority to Sartre after he undermines one of her theories in the Luxembourg Gardens; Monique becomes pregnant and gives up a career in medicine so as to facilitate her husband's entry into the medical profession; Suzanne neglects her painting because looking after her children takes up all of her time and energy; Laurence cannot remember the last time she read a newspaper; Josyane stops protesting against inequality in the home and steps into her mother's shoes; Elise puts her brother's educational needs first and both Ernaux's and Cardinal's narrators opt for traditionally 'feminine' degree courses and careers. In several of the texts, husbands, partners and male peers are portrayed as conniving in women's

oppression by not backing up verbal encouragement with practical help. They are therefore guilty of classic *mauvaise foi*.

The heroines use marriage and motherhood as a way of explaining or justifying their loss of motivation and intellectual self-neglect. This combination of bad faith, complicity and fatigue is all too frequently transmitted to their daughters. Time and time again they choose roles, careers or jobs that are deemed socially acceptable for their sex and class rather than struggling to improve their employment opportunities and modify gender stereotypes. Only Halimi succeeds in breaking this cycle of repetition by combating the religious, sexual and social barriers facing her and entering a traditionally male-dominated profession.

Motivation in girls is shown to wane rapidly. Josyane's brashness and self-assurance is replaced by a fatalistic acceptance of her biology and a desire to reproduce her parents' lifestyle when she falls in love and becomes pregnant. Ernaux's narrator gets married and finds that each day gender roles become more strongly delineated. Even growing up in a relatively egalitarian environment surrounded by positive role models cannot guarantee freedom from a subordinate position in later life. The segregation that occurs at institutions of further education where girls are steered towards arts subjects and boys towards science and engineering is reproduced in the home with the sexual division of labour.

The types of education and upbringing depicted in these novels illustrate how female academic development is impeded so that the low status of women can be maintained in society. Our attention is drawn to an invisible and unheard category of women whose intellectual resources are never sufficiently exploited. However, in recording the impact that this sort of education has on girls and how it determines their identity and affects the choices they make, the authors of the novels are attempting to raise awareness and redress the balance of male-oriented agendas and syllabuses. By writing down their thoughts and their

experiences the novelists are both finding a therapeutic way to come to terms with the discrimination they suffered and compensating for the censorship of women's writing and the suppression of women's history.

### **3. HOUSEWORK: THE DEATH OF ROMANCE**

We have seen that education and upbringing combine to encourage the girl to think of marriage and motherhood as her ultimate aim. Here, I intend to look more closely at the disadvantageous aspect of matrimony, the drudgery of housework. In her chapter on the married woman in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir makes no attempt to hide her contempt for housework, a pursuit she describes as futile, monotonous and self-perpetuating. She compares it with the punishment dealt to Sisyphus, the character in Greek mythology, whose task was to eternally roll a heavy stone up a hill, only to find that upon reaching the top the stone slipped from his grasp and rolled to the bottom again: 'Il y a peu de tâches qui s'apparentent plus que celles de la ménagère au supplice de Sisyphe; jour après jour, il faut laver les plats, épousseter les meubles, reprendre le linge qui seront à nouveau demain salis, poussiéreux, déchirés' (Beauvoir, 1949, vol. II: 266).

Beauvoir was fortunate enough not to become a victim of 'la manie ménagère' (268) which she so deplores. She was often excused from household chores, and a considerable part of her later life was spent living in hotel rooms and eating in cafés. Beauvoir laments the fact that for the full-time housewife the home becomes the centre of her world, an expression of her social status and a way of justifying her existence. She is emphatic that the only way a woman can be truly liberated and realise her full potential is through financial independence. To achieve this she must work outside the home.

Of course, progress has been made since the time of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Statistics indicate that since 1968 French women are far less likely to give up work because of

marriage or children. The figures today are especially high in the 25-49 age group, with over 78 per cent of women at work<sup>1</sup>, when previously maternity and childcare would have meant a withdrawal from the labour market. With women now playing such a well-defined role in the workforce, showing that it has become possible to combine both a career and a family, it is increasingly asserted that they have all but obtained their objective in the struggle for equality with men. Elisabeth Badinter, in an interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur* in May 1994, goes as far as to say that the French feminist movement has reached an impasse, and that it is now simply a question of negotiation between men and women in their personal relationships:

Nous n'avons plus rien à demander du point de vue du droit. Sauf peut-être la parité en politique. Nous avons obtenu un arsenal de lois très puissant, très égalitaire, qui couvre tous les domaines. Pourquoi descendrions-nous aujourd'hui dans la rue? Pour clamer que nos compagnons n'en fichent pas une rame à la maison?

' (Badinter, 1994: 40)

Interestingly, while Badinter deems parity in the political sphere to be important, she regards parity in the domestic sphere as a mere triviality. Yet inequitable distribution of domestic responsibilities constitutes a colossal problem. Certainly, things have improved in women's public lives. Maternity leave has increased from eight weeks to fourteen weeks (in 1966) to sixteen weeks (1980). Laws are in place which ensure equal pay for work of equal value (1972), forbid sexual discrimination (1975, 1983) and forbid dismissal of a woman on the grounds that she is pregnant (1980). These employment laws combined with the authorisation of contraception (1967), the legalisation of abortion (1975) and the increasing number of crèches<sup>2</sup> have offered women the option of combining a family with a career.

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<sup>1</sup>Figures from *Quid* 1999 (Frémy, 1999: 573).

<sup>2</sup>See INSEE, 1991: 138. 'En presque 20 ans le nombre des crèches collectives a à peu près triplé et leur capacité d'accueil approche désormais les 100,000 enfants. Les crèches familiales ont vu leur nombre décupler dans le même temps ainsi que leur capacité d'accueil qui approche les 60,000 enfants. Les jardins d'enfants, peu nombreux, acceptent 12,000 enfants. Les haltes garderies ont quintuplé en nombre depuis vingt ans et disposent de quelque 42,500 places. Au total donc, à des

Despite these apparent advances, however, unequal divisions between the sexes still obtain in women's private lives. Seventy per cent of women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four years combine work with bringing up two children<sup>3</sup>, and even when both partners work outside the home, as is more and more the case, housework and care of children retain their traditional status as women's work.

Women have been waiting a long time to be unshackled from the kitchen sink. Soviet women were promised emancipation as far back as 1917 at the time of the Russian Revolution. Lenin insisted that no nation could be free when half the population was enslaved in the kitchen<sup>4</sup>, yet the recommendations for housewives' liberation were never properly implemented, neither in the USSR nor elsewhere, as the women's struggle was always overshadowed by the more general class struggle and its focus on the male worker in industry. In the 1960s the French Communist Party was worried lest feminism could turn the struggle into a gender war rather than a class war and discouraged any separatist revolutionary activity by women.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it was believed that the destruction of capitalism would automatically lead to better conditions for women. This view was echoed by Beauvoir right up until the 1970s. It was really only in the last fifteen years of her life that she became more active in the women's movement when she realised the French Left did not have the answers to women's problems:

J'ai pensé que la victoire des femmes serait liée à l'avènement du socialisme. Or le socialisme, c'est un rêve, il n'existe nulle part. [...] D'ailleurs, les partis de gauche ne sont pas plus favorables aux femmes que les partis de droite. Le parti socialiste est

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titres et pour des degrés de garde divers, environ 215,000 places. A quoi il faut ajouter 133,000 assistantes maternelles agréées libres à la journée. [...] Si la moitié des 2-5 ans étaient scolarisés en 1960 la proportion est maintenant des cinq sixième.'

<sup>3</sup>Figures from French edition of *Marie-Claire*, issue no.500, April 1994.

<sup>4</sup>'Woman continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and to the nursery, and wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery. The real emancipation of women, real Communism, will begin only when a mass struggle [...] is started against this petty domestic economy, or rather when it is transformed on a mass scale into large-scale socialist economy.' (Lenin, 'A Great Beginning', June 28, 1919, in Marx, 1973)

<sup>5</sup>See Marks and De Courtivron, 1981: 28.



très déficient de ce point de vue-là, le parti communiste aussi, c'est même une des raisons qui ont contribué à la création de groupes véritablement féministes:

beaucoup de femmes se sont rendu compte que, ou dans le parti communiste, ou dans les groupuscules gauchistes, elles étaient toujours traitées, de toute manière, comme les servantes des hommes, des subordonnées.

' Alors, elles ont pensé qu'il fallait prendre la lutte des femmes entre leurs mains, en tant que lutte des femmes et pas seulement en travaillant avec les hommes à changer le monde. (Francis and Gontier, 1979: 584-589)

## THE DOMESTIC LABOUR DEBATE

Unsurprisingly, feminist theorists were the first to recognise a link between women's invisibility as unpaid classless workers in the home and their general subordination. They proposed that the reason housework is seen as valueless is because domestic labour is generally not interpreted as productive, that is, it does not create surplus value or profit and it cannot be exchanged for money. In this society, where money is often regarded as a symbol of status and social power, the person who does the housework quite frequently enjoys a lower status than the person who brings a wage into the household. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James are the feminist activists who initiated the Wages for Housework campaign and jointly wrote *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, in which they identify housewives and the family as a centre of social production. They propose that the vital profit-making resource for capitalism that housewives produce is the human being, that is, the future labourer.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See Dalla Costa and James, 1972: 11. 'First it must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed and trained; then when it works its bed must be made, its floors swept, its lunch box prepared, its sexuality not gratified but quietened, its dinner ready when it gets home, even if this is eight in the morning from the night shift. This is how labor power is produced and reproduced when it is daily consumed in the factory or the office. To describe its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work.'

Dalla Costa and James believe the lack of a salary excludes women from the social revolt. Their feminist demand for wages for housework is not formulated because they think women should remain slaves in the home but because the lack of a wage means that their exploitation remains hidden. The housewife should be recognised as exploited in the same way that the male factory worker is recognised as exploited. They stress that capitalism is totally dependent on the housewife and the services she provides free of charge and without going on strike. It is not only the husband who profits from his wife's cooking, cleaning and caring. She is as indispensable to capitalist production as the assembly line worker who does his job for a meagre wage, and as such she is a mine of untapped social power.

Many other feminist theorists and sociologists who have studied domestic labour acknowledge that housework is the backbone of the economy. Christine Delphy, in her essay, 'Travail ménager ou travail domestique?' compares the production of domestic services for others inside and outside the household. The thrust of her argument is that a woman who cooks a pork chop in her own home will not be paid, yet she is paid if she cooks a pork chop in somebody else's home. Delphy concludes that housework is unpaid because of 'la nature particulière du contrat qui lie la travailleuse — l'épouse — au ménage, à son «chef»' (Delphy, 1978: 50). She is careful to stress that housework is neither paid, nor remunerated in kind since it profits only others, unlike services performed for yourself which carry their own reward.

She further asserts that there is no rational basis for describing housework as unproductive since these selfsame domestic services are available commercially. A household can choose to pay for childcare, laundering or domestic cleaning, while food can be prepared by an outside caterer or purchased ready-made from supermarkets or from takeaways. These goods seem expensive because, of course, the price includes the cost of the labour. Delphy points out that despite these alternatives most households do, in fact, spend the larger part of their food budget on raw materials for the very reason that domestic

labour costs nothing. The plain contradiction exposed here is that labour performed outside the home is considered productive, is accounted for and is included in the gross national product, yet the very same labour performed within the home has no value on the market.

In addition to providing domestic labour, the housewife has an important emotional role to play within the family. Her ability to act as a counsellor and absorb any family tension or anxiety is crucial<sup>7</sup>, as is her position as a stabilising force within the home. Her husband can go to work in the knowledge that his children are clothed and fed and that their psychological and material welfare will be taken care of. Wives give more emotional support than they receive and men come to rely on this. Surveys have shown that men have greater difficulty coping without their wives, suggested by their higher and much earlier remarriage rate after divorce or widowhood and also by their higher death and illness rates following these life crises<sup>8</sup>. Women with jobs or careers are fortunate in one respect: their work gives them access to the exterior world where they can share their anxieties and achievements with colleagues and workmates. For the full-time housewife, whose main territory is her home, it is a different story. The family bring home to her the problems they have encountered at school and work during the day, but she has no neutral environment in which to discuss her own problems.

## **SOCIAL CLASS AND SEXUAL STRATIFICATION: A DOUBLE OPPRESSION**

Much debate has centred on the position of women within the class system, and how existing definitions of class, with their emphasis on a person's social and economic status, do

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<sup>7</sup>Dalla Costa and James (1972: 42) propose that a woman's passivity is itself productive because she becomes: '[a] receptacle for other people's emotional expression... the cushion of the familial antagonism... the outlet for all the oppressions that men suffer in the world outside the home and at the same time the object on whom the man can exercise a hunger for power that the domination of the capitalist organisation of work implants. In this sense, the woman becomes productive for capitalist organisation; she acts as a safety valve for the social tensions caused by it.'

<sup>8</sup>See Phillips and Rakusen, 1989: 452 (footnote) and Faludi, 1991: 44.

not take into account the sexual stratification within the family. In 'L'Ennemi principal', Delphy (1970: 168) boldly challenges the Marxist definition of class and the tendency to place married women in the same class as their husbands. The Marxist theory of materialism fails to accurately describe the situation of women because it does not treat sexuality as a social division. Delphy argues that since all women are subject to patriarchal exploitation because of the unpaid work they perform within marriage, they constitute only one class. When women's class is predicated on their relationship to production or on their husband's class, then the other hierarchical relationship experienced by women — that is, exploitation by their husbands — is ignored. In this sense the existing class system can be seen as divisive, as women of differing social backgrounds fail to recognise the oppression they have in common.

Monique Wittig develops Delphy's materialist feminist theory further in her collection *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. She concurs that the category of sex is a political, as opposed to a natural category, echoing Beauvoir's contention that woman is a mythic construction and that femininity is learned — 'on ne naît pas femme, on le devient' (Beauvoir, 1949, vol. II: 13). Wittig argues, however, that not only do husbands appropriate for themselves the unpaid labour of women in terms of domestic services and child rearing, they also appropriate the sexual services of women:

The [marriage] contract binding the woman to the man is in principle a contract for life, which only law can break (divorce). It assigns the woman certain obligations, including unpaid work. The work (housework, raising children) and the obligations (surrender of her reproduction in the name of her husband, cohabitation by day and night, forced coitus, assignment of residence implied by the legal concept of

“surrender of the conjugal domicile”) mean in their terms a surrender by the woman of her physical person to her husband. (Wittig, 1992: 6-7)<sup>9</sup>

Wittig sees the category of sex as a totalitarian one which imposes on women the compulsory reproduction of the species, that is, heterosexual society. Sexuality is therefore not freely chosen, but a ‘social institution of violence’ (19). The only way to escape this trap and to renegotiate the terms of the social contract is to transgress conventional sexual categories:

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation which we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation [...], a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or stay heterosexual. (Wittig, 1992: 20)

Whereas Delphy sets out to demonstrate that inequalities are rooted in social practices and that within heterosexual couples women’s labour is effectively owned by men, Wittig takes the logical next step forward by urging women to escape such servitude by establishing a lesbian sisterhood. Only one of our heroines, Céline, moves from an analysis of her marriage to an exploration of her sexuality: ‘— Dans le fond dit Julia, c’est le mariage qui doit rendre lesbienne’ (Rocheft, 1963: 138).

Although from different social classes, the fictional characters represented by my chosen authors all experience gender oppression within the home. Rocheft’s Josyane and

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<sup>9</sup>The essays “The Category of Sex” and “One is Not Born a Woman” from which the quotations are taken were written in English.

Letessier's Maryvonne are working-class, Rochefort's Céline and Ernaux's narrator are women from working-class backgrounds who have married into bourgeois families, and Beauvoir's Laurence and Fitoussi's *superwoman* are successful middle-class professionals. While they are all unquestionably oppressed by the same patriarchal system their educational and cultural backgrounds are so diverse that they inevitably have different ways of responding to this oppression.

The eldest of eleven children, Rochefort's protagonist, the hapless Josyane, grows up in an overcrowded *HLM* (Habitation à loyer modéré) in a working-class Parisian neighbourhood. Josyane's apprenticeship in housewifery and motherhood begins early. All the time she is not in school she is looking after her younger brothers and sisters. Division of labour according to sex is the norm:

' Le soir, je ramenaï les garçons et je les laissais dans la cour, à jouer avec les autres. Je montais prendre les sous et je redescendais aux commissions. Maman faisait le dîner, papa rentrait et ouvrait la télé, on mangeait, papa et les garçons regardaient la télé, maman et moi on faisait la vaisselle, et ils allaient se coucher. (Rochefort, 1961: 10)

It is not surprising that Josyane is so easily seduced by the illusion of romantic love, first with Guido and then with Philippe. The predictable irony for the reader is that she now feels she has the perfect answer for the Careers Advisor: 'Voilà ce que j'aurais dû répondre, à l'Oriëntation. Qu'est-ce que je voulais faire dans la vie? Aimer' (155). Josyane is convinced that her relationship is unique and so she faces marriage and motherhood with rapturous optimism, despite what her past experiences have taught her. Philippe differs from her previous boyfriends in that he does not expect more than a kiss on the first date, 'J'attendais qu'il me dise «Viens», et au lieu de ça il me disait «Je t'aime» [...] Il n'était vraiment pas comme les autres celui-là' (150). However, his self-restraint is extremely

seductive and four days later, the relationship is consummated. Although she is still a teenager, her subsequent unplanned pregnancy is not as unfortunate as it might first appear. Firstly, she has a supportive partner, and secondly, it gives her the opportunity to leave home and start living her own life. Her status is suddenly elevated because she is going to be a mother. Responsibility for another human being brings with it a certain autonomy, so although she shuddered in her younger years when neighbours called her 'une vraie petite maman', she now embraces this prospect, rushing to sort out housing and buy a cradle, in the awareness that they will qualify for 'la prime'.<sup>10</sup> And so the classic cycle of repetition is set in motion with the novel ending exactly as it begins. Unfortunately, Josyane seems unaware of how much she now resembles her own parents, nor does she consider that freeing herself from one kitchen sink may mean tying herself to another.

Josyane approaches adulthood with few options and is a teenage mother a year after leaving school. Her best friend Ethel, however, manages to escape a similar fate. She grows up on the same housing estate and attends the same school but, unlike Josyane, she continues her education at teacher training college in Paris. Josyane is initially envious especially since Ethel is excused from domestic chores when she has homework. In any case, housework is viewed as a shared responsibility in the Lefranc family: we witness Josyane's astonishment when she sees Ethel's two younger brothers helping with the dishes as if it were completely natural. But the Lefranc family are exceptional. The absence of sex-role stereotyping and the encouragement Ethel is given to pursue her studies, combined with the family's political awareness and refusal to accept that an increase in consumer durables means increased happiness, are the very factors which distinguish them from the Rouviers.

Through Josyane we are shown a consumer-oriented society in which prosperity no longer means the good health and education of the next generation but an accumulation of

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<sup>10</sup>The additional payment made to parents who have their first child either before the mother is 25 or within the first two years of marriage

the latest household and leisure items. In the introduction to the Thomas Nelson edition, P. M. W. Thody argues that *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* exposes the kind of nation produced when the state encourages the population to multiply like rabbits and 'then lodges them in noisy and overcrowded rabbit hutches' (xiii). This sort of domestic policy not only lacks foresight but is particularly repressive for women as they are the ones forced to stay at home to keep the baby production line going<sup>11</sup>. Motherhood can hardly be considered voluntary when contraception and abortion are illegal, and social, moral, political and financial pressures combine to make parenting the most attractive option for teenagers.

It is a society further condemned by Rochefort for its exploitation of female children by adults, a theme subsequently developed in her essay, *Les Enfants d'abord*<sup>12</sup>, and highlighted by Josyane on more than one occasion, especially since she is given adult responsibilities while her brothers are allowed to enjoy being children:

Bon Dieu ce que j'aimais pas les bonnes femmes! [...] Ça oblige de pauvres types, qui d'ailleurs ne méritent pas mieux, à s'échiner pour leur acheter des appareils coûteux et à crédit pour leur épargner du «travail», disent-elles, que d'ailleurs ça a toujours fait faire pratiquement par les mêmes. (Rochefort, 1961: 120-121)

Although *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* exaggerates the fecklessness of the working classes for comic effect, the novel constitutes an impassioned denunciation of consumer-led culture, patriarchal households, education systems that amount to nothing more than brainwashing, oppression of female children and poor housing conditions.

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<sup>11</sup>Halimi maintains that the reasons given by the state for wanting to increase the birth-rate are a hypocritical means of keeping women in their place: 'Il était important enfin, au terme de la démonstration, de passer à l'exécution pure et simple des thèses de nos adversaires. Exécution de l'hypocrisie qui, sous le couvert de l'argument patriotique (l'économie nationale, la démographie), ou humaniste (le respect de la vie), ne visait à rien d'autre qu'à maintenir la femme dans un asservissement séculaire.' (Halimi, 1992: 132.)

<sup>12</sup>See P. M. W. Thody's introduction, Rochefort, 1961: xvii.



In *La Femme gelée*, on the other hand, the reader is presented with a more seductive picture of working-class life in 1950s France. Ernaux's narrator has an advantage over Josyane in that she is not subject to the same indoctrination that teaches that a woman's place is in the home. There is no sexual division of labour in the narrator's household: specific tasks are shared out not according to gender but according to interest and ability. Unlike other fathers, hers is always at home serving in the café, cooking meals, peeling vegetables or washing the dishes. Similarly, her mother and her aunts belie the bourgeois sexual stereotype of the housewife gliding from room to room with a duster:

Mes femmes à moi, elles avaient toutes le verbe haut, des corps mal surveillés, trop lourds ou trop plats, des doigts râpeux, des figures pas fardées du tout ou alors le paquet, du voyant, en grosses taches aux joues et aux lèvres. Leur science culinaire s'arrêtait au lapin en sauce et au gâteau de riz, assez collant même, elles ne soupçonnaient pas que la poussière doit s'enlever tous les jours, elles avaient travaillé ou travaillaient aux champs, à l'usine, dans des petits commerces ouverts du matin au soir. (Ernaux, 1981: 9)

It is the narrator's friend, Brigitte, who seduces her into believing that housework is synonymous with being a good wife, a good mother and a competent homemaker. Brigitte lends a certain mystique to the role of housewife. She and her mother behave as if they were members of an exclusive club from which uninitiated men are barred:

C'est là que j'ai découvert une étonnante complicité ménagère entre mère et fille, dont je n'avais pas idée. «Tu as vu ton pull, je l'ai lavé au savon en paillettes, comme neuf. Je vais te faire un dessus-de-lit en cretonne, c'est frais, etc.» (Ernaux, 1981: 76)

The narrator finds her mother's previously untarnished image is suddenly impaired, and she endeavours to make up for lost time by spending a summer training herself in the arts of housewifery. To prove she can also be the perfect hostess, she makes a chocolate mousse:

Au repas de famille du 15 août, je boirai du petit-lait, tous ils se régaleront, ils disent «meilleur que chez le pâtissier» fini le «qu'est-ce qu'elle deviendra celle-là», ils s'empiffrent joyeusement de ma mousse au chocolat. Exultation d'être complète, il ne me manque plus rien. (Ernaux, 1981: 77)

Later, when she is married with a son, she looks back at the chocolate mousse episode with sadness, knowing she was duped into thinking it would be a joy to spend time now and again making fashionable and carefully-chosen culinary delights. The reality is far less glamorous since cooking on a daily basis is no longer a joy but an imposition. And when constant tasting and checking seasoning during the preparation dulls the appetite so that food can only be savoured through others' grunts of appreciation, then cooking is a chore:

Trois cent soixante-cinq repas multipliés pas deux, neuf cents fois la poêle, les casseroles sur le gaz, des milliers d'œufs à casser, de tranches de barbaque à retourner, de packs de lait à vider [...] Quelle tâche un homme est-il obligé de se coltiner, tous les jours, deux fois par jour, simplement parce qu'il est homme. Si loin de la petite mousse au chocolat mensuelle de l'adolescence, mon joyeux alibi pour montrer que je savais faire quelque chose de mes dix doigts comme les autres filles. (Ernaux, 1981: 164)

As a professional married couple living in a quiet suburb of Bordeaux, she and her husband cultivate a lifestyle alien to the narrator's provincial working-class childhood in Yvetot. Educationally and materially she is more privileged than her parents, but the class

transition demands that she extend her culinary expertise beyond packet soup and omelette, and beyond the simple yet nutritious food she was used to in rural Normandy, rabbit stew and rice pudding (9). Her husband demands a more sophisticated menu: cucumber salad, veal in breadcrumbs, chocolate mousse (124). The bourgeois ideal is reinforced by her mother-in-law, 'toujours gaie [...] sautillante, jamais assise [...] non non mon garçon on se débrouillera, tu nous gênerais! [...] du persil sur la viande froide, une tomate en rosace tralali, de l'œuf dur sur la salade, tralala' (135), and by the women's magazines her husband brings home for her.

Overall, Ernaux's account is imbued with a great sense of disillusionment as the protagonist weighs the discrepancy between the image she had of her future as a wife and mother and the reality. Like Josyane she was seduced by the idea of love and marriage, confident that they would be different from other couples: 'On a eu l'impression superbe de ne pas faire comme les autres, d'être mariés à la rigolade' (Ernaux, 1981: 126). Recalling Beauvoir's damning indictment of housework in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, she tries at first to emulate her role model, but she finds it is just not practical. When her husband comes home at lunch time he wants to know what she has been doing with all the free time she has. His anger is justified, he feels, because '[il] TRAVAILLE!' (150). Clearly, the implication is that housework and looking after a baby do not count as proper work. Later, when she enters her first proper teaching post, which should release her from the interminable sentence of domestic labour and childcare, she discovers there is a price to be paid for this freedom: she must dedicate her evenings to the chores that would previously have been spread out over the whole day.

The social pressure on Rochefort's Josyane is to leave school and become 'une vraie petite maman'; that exerted on Ernaux's narrator by the bourgeoisie is to conform to the flawless and radiant images of motherhood portrayed by the media and 'J'élève mon enfant' (157) style publications:

Mêmes mal torchés de mon enfance, à l'odeur surette, poussés tout seuls sous l'œil  
 · si peu éducatif d'une voisine fatiguée ou d'un grand-père gaga, comme si je pouvais  
 les prendre comme exemples! [...] Moi je vis dans un joli appartement, avec  
 baignoire gonflable, pèse-bébé et pommade pour les fesses, pas pareil, et la  
 malédiction de la psychanalyse «tout est joué avant trois ans», je la connais par  
 cœur. Elle pèse sur moi vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre. (Ernaux, 1981: 157)

The narrator sadly realises she can only feel reassured when she compares herself  
 to other women, but she knows her own sights were set much higher before she exchanged  
 the ideology of *Le Deuxième Sexe* for the home economics and the 'cent idées de salades'  
 (134) of *Marie-France*:

Avoir un métier, je l'avais assez voulu, l'étoile des siestes, des promenades au  
 Jardin. D'un côté, les femmes au foyer, mon horreur, de l'autre, les célibataires, des  
 existences que je me figure vides. Obligée de penser que j'avais la meilleure part.  
 On finit par ne plus comparer sa vie à celle qu'on avait voulue mais à celle des  
 autres femmes. Jamais à celle des hommes, quelle idée. (Ernaux, 1981: 171-172)

The novel ends bleakly with the narrator accepting that equality between men and  
 women is a utopian dream and not an attainable goal. The years of apprenticeship for her  
 role have numbed her into submission. Gripped by emotional paralysis, she gradually  
 becomes a frozen woman.

Céline Rhodes, protagonist of Rochefort's *Les Stances à Sophie*<sup>13</sup> is charmed by the  
 myth of romantic love like her predecessor, Josyane. The trap into which she is lured,

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<sup>13</sup>The title of the novel is borrowed from an army barrack-room song. See the preface to the text for further details.

however, is a bourgeois marriage to Philippe Aignan. In the name of love her husband persuades her to change her hair, her clothes, her friends, her tastes, her habits, her vocabulary, her whole way of life. He re-creates her so that she resembles the girls he usually goes out with: 'des filles toujours pimpantes, tirées à quatre épingles' (Rochefort, 1963: 8). Whereas the ending of *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* is somewhat ambiguous, Rochefort's third novel is more consciously feminist in its representation of marriage as a trap. The only other novel in my selection in which a more feminist approach to marriage is discernible is *Loïca*. Letessier's heroine, Loïca, thinks marriage is 'la corde au cou' (Letessier, 1983: 176). There is an interesting reversal of traditional gender roles in *Loïca*, in that it is Loïca's partner, Émile, who is anxious to feather the nest, while Loïca is accused of spending too much time away from home: 'Loïca n'était jamais assez présente. Jamais Émile n'arrivait à la posséder suffisamment pour s'oublier lui-même' (Letessier, 1983: 174). Both Loïca and the narrator (the journalist) describe a sense of being tied down by their partners, while their partners play roles that the reader may be more used to seeing played by women, that is, roles in which the partner left at home complains that the other is too involved in his or her work.

In *Les Stances à Sophie*, Céline's wedding, which should be joyful, is a disquieting affair: she arrives at the marriage ceremony in an outfit that would be more appropriate if she were burying an aunt, the dramatic significance of which is lost on Philippe and his family. They attribute it to her recent nervous breakdown but in fact the day of her marriage signals the death of her previous self and the birth of Madame Philippe Aignan. From this moment on she is the middle-class wife of a middle-class executive and she is astonished at how quickly and easily she adapts to her new role, how rapidly she has become someone who is passionate about furnishing fabrics: 'Lisez France-Femme et vous saurez vivre' (Rochefort, 1963: 55-57).

Rocheport launches a several-pronged attack in *Les Stances à Sophie*. Although similar to *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* in its humorous references to consumerism and capitalism, the real target of *Les Stances à Sophie* is bourgeois society, with its pretentious materialism. Céline marries into a social class intent on quashing individuality and silencing dissent. The role expected of her is one of quiet devotion and complete submission to her husband's wishes, prompting her to refer to her life with Philippe as 'le Carmel'.<sup>14</sup> Living on the *rue de la Pompe* in the 16th arrondissement and married to a wealthy executive, Céline does not have the same domestic workload as Josyane in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*. Their Spanish maid, Juana, cleans and starches the collars of Philippe's shirts, leaving Céline the function of homemaker, hostess and, ironically, 'intendant de maison' (99). However, Céline finds this role annoyingly counterproductive as a significant proportion of her day is spent struggling to find work for Juana to do:

'Je dois travailler à lui trouver du travail, moi qui ne suis pas payée. [...] Alors je dois me mettre à penser à des choses emmerdantes pour lui en trouver une à faire, et qui soit utile en plus. Le labeur que ça me procure d'occuper la bonne c'est pas croyable, jamais j'ai sué autant quand j'étais à mon compte, jamais je ne me suis tant penchée sur les travaux domestiques, que depuis que je suis comme on dit servie. (Rocheport, 1963: 84)

The life of a bourgeois housewife is again shown to be dictated by women's magazines. Céline is programmed to live a certain lifestyle and to acquire all the technical vocabulary of domestic management — 'la doublure', 'le plumetis', 'le voile de nylon' — and any contravention of this code of conduct is frowned upon. If she decides she wants a colour or a fabric that is not in the magazines then she can expect a laborious search:

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<sup>14</sup>See Rocheport, 1963: 24, 34, 47, 97, 99, 209, 210.

Ils ont décidé que cette année j'aurai des casseroles tango, pétrole ou tourterelle; tout comme les autres dames. Il n'y a pas de raison. [...] Les sacs, les maillots de bain sont également tango cette année je ne sais pas si vous l'avez remarqué, et si vous vous reportez à France-Femme vous verrez que ça y fait rage à chaque page et si vous ne vous y mettez pas vous aurez l'air d'une noix. C'est un ordre. [...] Et puis comme par enchantement les casseroles bleu pâle comme je voulais sont introuvables dans les rayons: on ne les fait plus Madame — vais-je m'épuiser en vaines recherches, me faire archéologue de casseroles, par pur entêtement?

(Rochefort, 1963: 58)

Céline struggles with her role as her husband's accessory and domestic manager, but Julia, the wife of Philippe's friend, Jean-Pierre, teaches her a different strategy: 'Il n'y a qu'une chose qui te concerne là-dedans: qu'il ramasse le fric et que toi tu le bouffes. On dirait que tu n'arrives pas à comprendre ce que c'est que le mariage' (74-75). Once Céline's initial resistance has been quietened, she behaves like 'une vraie petite Geisha'. Rochefort parodies the set rituals of the dinner party:

Je cause: je dis oui oui bien sûr. J'approche les cendriers des fauteuils, j'allume les cigarettes (très apprécié), pas une ne m'échappe, une cigarette sort et hop, je suis là, avec un briquet allumé [...]. A mon apéritif on ne passe pas seulement l'olive, mais le saucisson en plusieurs espèces, la crevette suivie du rince-doigts, et quand je suis un peu de mauvais poil le caviar. (Rochefort, 1963: 100-101)

Céline and Julia are quick to calculate the bartering value of their femininity and their bodies, and realise that they can use their sexuality as a medium of exchange for material possessions. They deliberately behave like the *belles images* their husbands expect them to be, putting on 'des vrais festivals de connerie féminine' simply to keep the men content: 'On récite France-Femme, soins de beauté recettes de cuisine produits d'entretien Horoscope.

Comme ça ils sentent qu'ils ont des femmes' (127). By becoming experts at beguilement they are mimicking the bourgeois values they both despise and at the same time they are duping their husbands into rewarding them with stoles and mink coats.

However, despite Julia's stimulating company the narrator still feels stifled. She realises, like Ernaux's narrator, that not only do men and women have completely different perceptions of the world but they speak a different language. Céline discovers that love has two meanings, depending on whether you are a man or a woman<sup>15</sup>: 'Amour. — A: pour une femme; consécration totale à la vie domestique, avec service de nuit. B: pour un homme; être content comme ça' (Rochefort, 1963: 188). Unlike *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, *Les Stances à Sophie* ends triumphantly. In a cynical parody of the romantic tradition, Céline decides to leave Philippe and his hypocritical bourgeois values — 'poli sur le dessus, et la pire muflerie en dedans' (206) — for a life alone in order to reclaim her former identity and focus on her writing.

Rochefort's *Les Stances à Sophie* and Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images* have many similarities in that both highlight the hypocrisy and repressive nature of bourgeois society. Like Céline, Laurence finds the words she uses and the thoughts she has are not her own but are a product of the bourgeois milieu in which she has been brought up. The key word in Beauvoir's novel is 'image' linking up with Laurence's job in advertising but also, more importantly, with the idea that a woman must conform to a certain image. Laurence's overly protective mother made certain that her daughter was always immaculately presented and brought her up to be *sage comme une image* with a strong notion of cleanliness:

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<sup>15</sup>Cardinal too maintains that words have different meanings for men and women. In *Autrement dit* she gives examples: 'A l'heure actuelle tous les mots ont deux sens, deux sexes, selon qu'ils sont employés par un homme ou par une femme. [...] Prenons un mot comme "table". Quand une femme écrit "table", tout simplement, dans une phrase banale, par exemple: "dans la pièce il y avait une table..." on lit cette table comme si elle était servie, nettoyée, utile, cirée, fleurie ou poussiéreuse. Quand un homme écrit: "dans la pièce il y avait une table..." on lit cette table comme si elle était faite de bois ou d'une autre matière, l'œuvre d'un artisan ou d'un ouvrier, le fruit d'un travail, le lieu où on va s'asseoir pour manger ou pour parler. Ce mot simple vit différemment selon que c'est un homme ou une femme qui l'a écrit' (Cardinal, 1977: 88).



, Elle a toujours été une image. Dominique y a veillé, fascinée dans son enfance par des images si différentes de sa vie, tout entière butée — de toute son intelligence et son énorme énergie — à combler ce fossé [...]. Petite fille impeccable, adolescente accomplie, parfaite jeune fille. Tu étais si nette, si fraîche, si parfaite [...] dit Jean-Charles. (Beauvoir, 1966: 21-22)

Having spent her whole life in this environment, Laurence submits to the pressures to conform to the vision of family life illustrated in *Plaisir de France* and *Votre Maison* (7). She finds she has inherited her mother's rigorous domestic standards, and they are nowhere more clearly captured than in the scene where her daughter, Catherine, is playing in her bedroom with her friend, Brigitte. The first things Laurence notices are the untidiness of the room, the safety-pin holding up the hem of Brigitte's skirt and the child's dishevelled appearance: 'mieux arrangée, elle pourrait être jolie' (53). She can sense the child's freedom in that she has been brought up not to regard self-image as a priority. Despite this she is unable to resist commenting on the safety-pin: 'Mais attendez, je vais faire un point à votre jupe [...] Mais si, c'est vilain' (55). However, in this novel, Laurence's mental health is seriously affected by the strain of maintaining a certain image, conforming to bourgeois pressures and perpetuating the illusion that she is in control of her life, and she eventually suffers a nervous breakdown.

The pressures are different for Letessier's heroine in *Le Voyage à Paimpol* but she also suffers a breakdown of sorts, that is, an inability to function properly because of the strain of her day-to-day routine. The heroine's situation as a working mother illustrates perfectly the paradox discussed in my introduction, namely that although paid labour liberates a woman, such labour can also be highly exploitative. In the factory, where female work is underpaid and unrewarding, women encounter discrimination on the grounds of both sex and class. Furthermore, as Dalla Costa and James make plain (1972: 35), slavery on the assembly line does not entail liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink. It does not make a

difference whether the work a woman does is professional or unskilled, a fact borne out by Ernaux's *femme gelée* and Fitoussi's *superwoman*. Much depends on whether the man who shares the house shares the housework. Maryvonne finds working outside the home simply doubles the demands made of her:

J'en ai marre des:

«Maryvonne, où t'as mis mon pantalon?

— Maman, j'ai faim.

— Maryvonne, tu peux taper ce tract à la machine?

— Maryvonne, à dix heures vous irez remplacer madame D... sur la chaîne.

— Maryvonne, tu peux venir avec moi, voir le chef d'atelier, il ne veut pas me donner mes congés en août?

— Maryvonne, tu penseras à échanger mes chaussures à la coop, je me suis trompé de pointure.» (Letessier, 1980: 148-149)

When she visits the doctor, completely drained of energy and run-down, she must prove that she is sufficiently ill to warrant a sickness certificate (16-17). As her conscience reminds her, absenteeism costs tax-payers and the state money. In a capitalist society that is more interested in financial returns than the well-being of the workers, Maryvonne is not a person who is about to collapse from mental and physical exhaustion, she represents a negative asset. Furthermore, when ill, she is not given time off her second job — doing the housework — by her husband:

Mais quand il rentre le bonhomme trouve que le ménage n'est pas assez fait, que tout de même j'aurais pu faire les courses. En deux jours, il est devenu celui qui travaille, qui est fatigué comme ce n'est pas permis [...].

Je ne travaille pas et, en restant au chaud, je le trahis. Pour expier cet abandon, pour faire oublier mon plaisir, je dois produire quelque chose, une chambre bien rangée, un jardin bêché, ou un bœuf bourguignon. (Letessier, 1980: 18-19)

As a trade union delegate at the factory, she struggles to improve working conditions for her colleagues so why should she not be militant at home too? Like Laurence of *Les Belles Images*, Maryvonne sublimates her frustrations to the point where she becomes ill. Her full-time dual role as factory worker and wife/mother has objectified her to the extent that she has lost sight of the real Maryvonne and now exists purely for others. Her husband treats her as if she were literally part of the furniture: 'Cela me plaît de l'imaginer, seul, inquiet, se demandant ce que je fabrique [...] «Où qu'est passée ma femme? Je croyais bien l'avoir rangée là, entre le buffet et l'évier, mais je n'arrive pas à remettre la main dessus, c'est incroyable!»' (11).

In Paimpol she books a room with a bath and dines in the hotel restaurant, relishing the fact that she does not have to get up between courses. At home during meal-times she is normally still on duty. The evening meal is normally a chance to talk about the factory, their friends and the day's news. While it is acceptable to grumble about the factory conditions, Maryvonne has to suppress dissatisfaction with her work at home. Instead, disappointment with her lot is expressed in asides to the reader: '«Ronge pas tes ongles, disait mon père, sinon tu trouveras pas de mari.» J'en ai trouvé un. J'aurais peut-être mieux fait de me ronger les ongles et de me faire clocharde' (77). And although these remarks are flippant they are tinged with regret: 'On nous avait mariés en deux coups de cuillère à pot et au début je trouvais émouvant de coudre un ourlet au bas d'un pantalon d'homme' (102). Maryvonne's self-indulgence in Paimpol does not loosen the firm grip she has on the reality of her situation. She can make noble resolutions for the future but she is aware that as an unskilled working-class woman, any hope of pursuing a life other than the one she knows is unrealistic:

Je ne sais que rêvasser. Je suis incapable de prendre une autre voie. [...] Je voudrais être libre et je ne peux pas vivre sans homme et sans amis. Je m'imagine en aventurière et je m'affole pour un porte-monnaie perdu. J'aime les belles dames mais je méprise leur vie de parasite et je passe ma vie dans des blouses sinistres pleines de taches. (Letessier, 1980: 150-151)

She finally resolves to return home and make the most of the life she has, fantasising during the journey that her husband will have done some of the housework so that they can spend the evening in bed together:

Il est là. Il m'attend. Il a couché l'enfant de bonne heure et il s'applique à cuisiner un repas pour nous deux. [...]

J'ouvrirai lentement la porte. Je m'avancerai vers lui en souriant. Soulagé, il me regardera revenir en prenant l'air de rien. Je dirai simplement: «J'ai envie de toi». (Letessier, 1980: 152)

In another parody of the romantic idyll, Maryvonne imagines a passionate reconciliation, recreating the ardour of the beginning of the relationship when, like so many of the heroines discussed here, she believed their partnership would be a perfect one: 'Amour. Toujours. Éternel. Nous abusons de ce vocabulaire naïf en regrettant de ne pas avoir l'exclusivité [...]. Nous étions différents, nous seuls savions aimer' (71). The sordid reality, however, is much less romantic. Her husband has scribbled a note saying he has followed her example and gone away for a few days too, leaving their son with Maryvonne's mother. The man can, and has, opted out, but what irritates Maryvonne more is that he has stupidly forgotten to turn off the light. This anti-climax reinforces the harsh reality of their situation.

For many of the protagonists of the texts I am discussing, awareness of their situation, their *prise de conscience*, comes too late. But Fitoussi's *Le Ras-le-bol des superwomen* demonstrates that even those women who grew up with a certain feminist awareness find they easily slip into gender-specific roles in the home. The tyranny of the *superwoman* means that a woman must excel at everything from her appearance, 'visage frais, mains soignées, maquillage très léger [...] taille mannequin [...] cheveu toujours propre et bien coiffé' (33) to her cuisine:

Pas celui, prosaïque, de la grande surface, au pire bâclé en nocturne à Carrefour [...] Non, le marché, le vrai, c'est celui des petits commerçants du quartier. Bon pain, pâtes fraîches, fromages affinés, fruits exotiques, légumes variés, viande achetée chez un boucher qui aime son métier, vrai café moulu à la dimension de la cafetière, fleurs.... (Fitoussi, 1987: 114)

The author feels women have worked so hard to reach the fulfilment that lies just around the corner that they have overtaken it and left it behind. She has no doubt that advertising and the media are largely to blame for shifting the target each time and encouraging women to aim higher and higher, especially since 1982 when all the major titles proclaimed from the rooftops that the women's struggle was over and that the new woman could successfully combine both feminism and femininity<sup>16</sup>:

On nous gave à toutes les lignes de conseils et de recettes pour en faire toujours plus, toujours plus loin, toujours plus haut. [...] Conseils, recettes, trucs pour maigrir, bronzer, avoir de belles jambes, de beaux bras, faire ses pâtes fraîches soi-même, redécorer son intérieur en deux coups de pinceau, etc. (Fitoussi, 1987: 196-197)

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<sup>16</sup>Fitoussi is quoting from *La Presse féminine*, "Que sais-je?", P.U.F. See Fitoussi, 1987: 197.

She concludes by asking women to place hope in their daughters and arm them for the future so that they will not always crave more and wear themselves out like their mothers:

Mais non, on a tout voulu, tout désiré, tout pris, tout obtenu. Nous avons tout englouti comme les boulimiques que nous sommes devenues. Et dès qu'on a tout eu il nous a encore fallu aller vers autre chose. La satisfaction n'est pas de notre monde. Un grand amour? Il nous faut l'enfant. Un enfant? Il nous en faut deux, puis trois ou quatre. Un mari? Il nous faut un amant. Un job? Il nous faut grimper au sommet. Les hauteurs? Il nous faut aussi le fric. La réussite complète? Il nous faut le bonheur. Tout à la fois? Ça va toujours pas, ras-le-bol d'être SuperWoman... (Fitoussi, 1987: 216)

## HOUSEWORK OR WORKHOUSE?

When a woman's full-time workplace is her home she is her own boss. She can work at her own pace, she can start and finish work whenever it suits her, she can take a tea-break without first asking permission and she can leave the premises at any time. However, her working conditions are far from ideal. Being your own boss can mean a light workload but more often than not women set themselves scrupulous and inflexible standards. There is a seemingly in-built tendency to increase standards and introduce more sophisticated methods of cleaning so that women today do not put in any fewer hours than their mothers or grandmothers. Moreover, Stevi Jackson in her article *Towards a Historical Sociology of Housework*, claims that although modern cookers and convenience foods have reduced the time spent on cooking, more time is now spent shopping for food as a result of the centralisation of grocery retailing and the demise of deliveries. Manufacturers of detergents and domestic appliances have to find new ways of promoting and selling their

products so they invent new kinds of dirt and set new measures of cleanliness: 'Omo vous garantit le linge le plus propre du monde!' proclaims an advert in *Paris-Match*<sup>17</sup> in 1966, the year that Brégeon's story of a world-weary housewife was published.

In *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* Josyane talks of the women she sees in the supermarket fondly patting their pregnant bellies and saying, 'Et mon frigidaire, il est là!' (Rochéfort, 1961: 84) They believe increased family allowance payments will buy them increased leisure in the form of a washing-machine or a freezer, yet they are doubly duped. Firstly they do not consider how another child might affect their lives, and secondly they are victims of a commonly-held belief — that domestic appliances are labour-saving and make a housewife's load lighter. Instead, increased mechanisation has led to higher standards of cleanliness. Time that is saved washing dishes in a dishwasher rather than by hand is filled with other chores because housework expands to fill the time available: 'Sitôt la vaisselle rangée dans la machine, vous appuyez sur un bouton... et vous pouvez partir faire des courses.'<sup>18</sup>

One of the unusual things about housework is that it is a job that a woman has been learning all her life. As Oakley points out in *Housewife*, no other type of work is prefaced by such a long apprenticeship. Inevitably then, methods of doing things are passed from mother to daughter, and women try to match their mother's standards or else improve on them. Laurence of *Les Belles Images* finds her mother's high standards weigh heavy on her shoulders. Dominique has always had very strict ideas on cleanliness, body-image and *savoir vivre* to the extent that in later life Laurence suffers serious psychological repercussions.

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<sup>17</sup>From an advert for Omo soap powder in *Paris-Match*, no. 890, 30 April 1966, p.44.

<sup>18</sup>From an advert for AEG dishwashers in *Paris-Match*, no. 886, 2 April 1966, p.22.

Housewives and working women do not only have to contend with the battle against dirt. As highlighted in both Ernaux's novel and Fitoussi's *Le Ras-le-bol des superwomen*, a disproportionate length of time may be devoted to the preparation of food. Despite the availability of ready-prepared food and microwave ovens this is still considered the easy way out. For French women who care about the family diet and who wish to show that they are as competent in the kitchen as they are in the office, Fitoussi points out that *la cuisine à l'ancienne* is essential:

Car [SuperWoman] aime aussi [...] se lancer comme une grande dans le déchiffrement des fiches-cuisine de *Elle* ou de la cuisine quatre étoiles de Senderens ou Guérard. Sa table est réputée. Lotte aux petits oignons, tagliatelles au magret fumé, terrine d'avocats, mousse aux poivrons, navets crus au haddock, foie gras maison, ou tout simplement pot-au-feu des familles... (Fitoussi, 1987: 114)

Gastronomy carries a deeper significance for French women because, as Ernaux has suggested in an interview with Fallaize (1993: 72-73), the French have a heightened preoccupation with food and thus meal-times play an enormous part in family life. A feature in a French women's magazine showed that even women with high-pressure jobs are reluctant to cut corners where preparation of food is concerned: 'Je cuisine pour deux ou trois jours, des vrais repas, avec des menus mûrement réfléchis. Les dîners improvisés, avec le mari et les mômes avachis devant la télé, je refuse!' (Bernadette, Marketing Manager)<sup>19</sup>. Fallaize surmises that the role of food is one of the reasons why the situation of women in France is not as advanced as that of women in Britain and the USA.

In *Le Ras-le-bol des superwomen*, Fitoussi is highly critical of the messages aimed at housewives in advertising but she also resents the work women make for themselves even when they have paid help in the home: 'Perfectionnistes? Certes. Mais

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<sup>19</sup>See Maury, 1994: 83.



obsessionnelles plus encore. [...] Qui n'est jamais repassé derrière ceux à qui on «délègue»? [...] Qui n'a jamais vérifié derrière celles qui nous aident au ménage si la poussière des meubles a été bien ôtée, la cuisine dans les coins bien nettoyé?» (Fitoussi, 1987: 213-214). She is equally hard on the *nouvelhomme* who agrees to do his share of the housework, but only on certain conditions, 'le gratifiant pour lui, le reste pour son admirable compagne, en gros' (173), and only when his wife reminds him, 'C'est vraiment tuant de tout lui répéter tous les jours comme si nous étions définitivement le chef et lui l'exécutant' (173). Fitoussi's complaints are substantiated in an issue of French *Marie Claire* which reveals that in the last ten years French men have increased the time they spend doing housework by only eleven minutes, while the tasks they do attempt are usually prompted by their partners. In consequence working women have no option but to become experts at time management. Marie-France, a full-time journalist and single parent of three children between the ages of eight and seventeen, explains:

D'abord je ne me sépare jamais de ma carte téléphone et d'une longue liste de numéros: les voisins, les écoles, la salle de sport, les médecins. J'ai laissé aussi des procurations à des voisines, pour récupérer mon fils à l'école en cas de problème ou de grève de train de dernière minute. Car le moindre grain de sable , dans l'organisation d'une journée, et c'est la catastrophe [...] Autre règle de base: ne jamais tomber malade. (Maury, 1994: 80.)

## PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

Two of Beauvoir's later novels illustrate the lasting psychological effects suffered by housewives because of isolation and the habitual suppression of emotions.<sup>20</sup> In *Les Belles*

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<sup>20</sup>Dalla Costa and James believe that one of the effects of a wife becoming a bosom for other family members' emotions is that her own unaired frustrations are sublimated in compulsive cleaning and tidying in the home.

*Images* Laurence looks back at her early married life and realises that her self-neglect stems from that period:

Pourquoi elle a régressé pendant les premières années de son mariage, elle l'a compris, le cas est classique. L'amour, la maternité, c'est un choc émotionnel violent, quand on se marie très jeune, et qu'entre l'intelligence et l'affectivité il ne s'est pas encore établi un harmonieux équilibre. Il me semblait n'avoir plus d'avenir: Jean-Charles, les petites en avaient un; moi pas; alors à quoi bon me cultiver? Cercle vicieux: je me négligeais, je m'ennuyais et je me sentais de plus en plus dépossédée de moi. (Beauvoir, 1966: 43)

Both the lack of autonomy she experienced as a child and the fear that her eldest daughter Catherine might follow in her footsteps cause Laurence to retaliate by starving herself. Through anorexia she can at least show she controls her own body. The illness is brought on by both a hatred of herself and her bourgeois upbringing which she can quite literally no longer stomach. Although it is too late to really alter her own situation she decides that Catherine's life will not be dictated by middle-class convention, in the way hers has been and still is.

Murielle is the protagonist of 'Monologue', one of the three short stories that make up *La Femme rompue* and another text in which Beauvoir highlights some of the psychological problems suffered by housewives. Murielle is coping with the aftermath of her daughter's suicide, for which she is partly responsible, and two marriage break-ups. Her monologue is full of bitterness and vitriolic attacks on her family and two ex-husbands, but the irrational rantings are punctuated with details that suggest she may be more pitied than despised. She is spending New Year's Eve alone in her apartment while the rest of Paris is celebrating with friends and loved ones, a background that serves only to magnify her isolation. Her attempts to contact her former partner Tristan are thwarted because he does not answer

when she telephones, so she is left with only her four walls to talk to. Unfortunately Murielle is unable see beyond the four walls that have become her world and so the only escape she envisages is suicide. She has invested her all in her role as wife and mother and now that these services are surplus to requirements she must call her whole identity into question.

Despite the fact that she has a competent *femme de ménage* in Mariette, Murielle, like Fitoussi's *superwoman*, plays a supervisory role to ensure that her exacting standards of cleanliness are adhered to:

Encore celle-là [Mariette] je l'ai mise au pas elle se tient à peu près à sa place. Y en a qui se foutent des gants de caoutchouc pour faire la vaisselle et qui jouent à la dame ça je ne supporte pas. Je ne veux pas non plus qu'elles soient crados qu'on trouve des cheveux dans la salade et des traces de doigts sur les portes. (Beauvoir, 1968: 92)

Murielle's excessive concern that her house be spotless seems masochistic as she envisages the rigorous tidying up she will have to do after Francis and Tristan have visited:

C'est tout de même gigantesque que je tiennne proprement ma maison. Il est impeccable en ce moment ce salon net lustré brillant comme la lune d'autrefois. Demain soir à sept heures tout sera salopé je devrai me taper un grand nettoyage lessivée comme je le serai. (Beauvoir, 1968: 101)

Sterility mirrors the sterility of her life and emotions. Murielle's behaviour suggests that she is desperately clinging onto the last vestiges of a 'career' that at least gave her life a shape. There is also the Freudian implication that she is metaphorically purging the house of unpleasant memories that she does not want to face. However, Murielle's fixation with cleanliness may not just be an expression of her unaired frustrations: there are other feasible

explanations. Women often become house-proud as a reaction to the lack of control they have over things that go on outside the home and so they assume responsibility for all that goes on inside it, adopting it as their domain and acting as petty tyrants within it. We recall Beauvoir's assessment of the housewife's situation in *Le Deuxième Sexe*:

L'homme ne s'intéresse que médiocrement à son intérieur parce qu'il accède à l'univers tout entier et parce qu'il peut s'affirmer dans des projets. Au lieu que la femme est enfermée dans la communauté conjugale: il s'agit pour elle de changer cette prison en un royaume. (Beauvoir, 1949, vol. II: 261)

<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Chesler, in *Women and Madness*, attributes some blame to the fact that women are subject to influential conditioning from when they are very young, which instils in them a profound respect for hygiene. Cardinal and Halimi recall this aspect of their upbringing in their texts. Finally, women who do not work feel the overriding imperative to make housework a full-time occupation, to establish daily routines, targets and high standards in order to make the day more structured and, hopefully, more rewarding.

A great deal is revealed about Murielle and her relation to housework simply by the language she uses. The insults she hurls and the deprecatory references she makes frequently revolve around the housewife's biggest enemy, dirt. For Murielle this represents the greatest slur:

Sûr que c'est toujours aussi cra-cra chez elle. [...]

Ça n'existe pas l'hygiène sur cette terre l'air est pollué pas seulement à cause des autos et des usines mais à cause de ces millions de bouches sales qui l'avalent et le recrachent du matin au soir; quand je pense que je baigne dans leur haleine j'ai envie de fuir au fond du désert; comment se garder un corps propre dans un monde

aussi dégueux on est contaminé par tous les pores de la peau et pourtant j'étais  
saine nette je ne veux pas qu'ils m'infectent. (Beauvoir, 1968: 95)

Murielle's self-identity is blurred: witness the conflicting images that flit through her mind. On the one hand, she wants to be just like everyone else, a respectable housewife, 'Merde alors! je veux qu'on me respecte je veux mon mari mon fils mon foyer comme tout le monde' (94), and like Dominique ('Même avec un nom une femme sans homme, c'est une demi-ratée'<sup>21</sup>), she must have a male partner in order to envisage herself as a social entity, 'Une femme seule ils se croient tout permis [...] Un homme sous mon toit. Le plombier serait venu le concierge me saluerait poliment' (93-94). On the other hand, she has egotistical fantasies of writing her life story and becoming a celebrity, with her picture in book shop windows. The favoured image of herself, however, is a dramatic, publicly staged suicide which is mentioned on three occasions:

Piquer une crise de nerfs devant le petit m'ouvrir les veines sur leur paillason.  
(Beauvoir, 1968: 93)

Et si je me tuais devant [Francis] crois-tu que ça lui ferait un beau souvenir? [...]  
Non ce n'est pas du chantage sale con pour la vie que j'ai ça ne me coûterait pas va  
de me descendre. Il ne faut pas pousser les gens à bout ils deviennent capables de  
tout on voit même des mères qui se suicident avec leur gosse. (Beauvoir, 1968:  
117)

Je me descendrai dans son salon je m'ouvrirai les veines quand ils se ramèneront il  
y aura du sang partout et je serai morte. (Beauvoir, 1968: 118)

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<sup>21</sup>Beauvoir, 1966: 142.

She considers her own death nine times<sup>22</sup> in total during the monologue but she dismisses instantaneously any scenario that does not involve an audience. This would suggest that her real wish is to play a melodramatic martyr's role to punish her family for having neglected her. The desire for attention combined with her threats to involve Francis are symptoms not very dissimilar to those of a mental disorder that has received a lot of media coverage, Munchausen's by proxy<sup>23</sup>, which invites serious reflection on the pressures of being confined in the home alone with small children.

Monique of 'La Femme rompue' is from a middle-class background, as are most of Beauvoir's protagonists, and although like Murielle she employs domestic help, this is not to enable her to pursue her career. Monique has opted instead for what she dignifies as 'la vocation du foyer' (Beauvoir, 1968: 188).

When she discovers her husband, Maurice, is having an affair with another woman, she feels bereft not only because she loves her husband, but because she has devoted her life to being a wife and mother and has, in effect, lived through him and her daughters: 'Quand on a tellement vécu pour les autres, c'est un peu difficile de se reconvertir, de vivre pour soi [...] je sais très bien [...] combien j'avais besoin du besoin que mes filles avaient de moi' (143).

At one point, she opens the cupboard where Maurice's shirts, pyjamas and underwear are kept, and she feels intensely jealous at the thought that his mistress, Noëllie, has the opportunity to brush her cheek against the softness of his clothing. It could almost be an advertisement for fabric conditioner, the subliminal message being that a woman shows her love for her family by the way she takes care of their clothes. Certainly in this

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<sup>22</sup>See Beauvoir, 1968: 93, 96, 99, 100-101, 106, 109, 110-111, 117, 118.

<sup>23</sup>Sufferers of Munchausen's by proxy hurt or kill their children in order to get attention and although there is much controversy surrounding the condition, especially as recent cases in Britain and the USA have focused on women who claim their children were victims of cot death. See Bowen-Jones, 1994.

scene, the husband's clothing functions as an erotic focus. The infatuated Monique appears to have been taken in by the advertiser's myth: 'J'ai regardé ses pyjamas, ses chemises, ses slips, ses maillots de corps; et je me suis mise à pleurer. Qu'une autre puisse caresser sa joue à la douceur de cette soie, à la tendresse de ce pull-over, je ne le supporte pas' (Beauvoir, 1968: 141).

One of Monique's strategies to win back Maurice is to give up competing with Noëllie's charm and dynamism and to compete instead at what she feels she does best: being a good wife and mother:

J'ai passé la journée à mettre de l'ordre dans nos armoires [...] C'est réconfortant, des placards bien remplis où chaque chose est à sa place. Abondance, sécurité [...] Les piles de fins mouchoirs, de bas, de tricot m'ont donné l'impression que l'avenir ne pouvait pas me faire défaut. (Beauvoir, 1968: 179)

The futility of this exercise in *mauvaise foi* is evident to the reader, but because this is a period of great instability for Monique, doing normal household tasks like folding and tidying away clothes is very reassuring. While Monique is turning things over in her mind she spends a good deal of time in their apartment and this is significant because it is here that she is surrounded by symbols of her affection for her husband and family. Ironically, objects acquired at different stages in their marriage, which were previously just part of the decor, now represent a shared experience and assume a different and threatening significance. The wooden statue bought with Maurice on holiday in Egypt is a good example. In an attempt to rebuild her self-confidence she goes out on a therapeutic date with Quillan, an old admirer who is far more interested in Monique than she in him. When Quillan accidentally knocks over the statue and breaks it, Monique's reaction is intense: she cries out loudly, almost as if it signifies the break up of her marriage:

Il a bondi vers la cheminée, avec tant d'élan et de maladresse qu'il a renversé la statuette de bois que j'ai achetée avec Maurice en Égypte et que j'aime tant. J'ai poussé un cri: elle était cassée! [...] Il est parti, je suis restée stupide, avec un morceau de ma statue dans chaque main. Et je me suis mise à sangloter.

(Beauvoir, 1968: 170)

Later, the patched up statue is emblematic of her delusions that their relationship can be salvaged.

Monique has been occupied full-time in making this apartment into a home for her family, adding loving touches here and there with an ingenuity that always delighted Maurice in the past: '«Tu es merveilleuse!» Une simple fleur, un beau fruit, un pull-over que je lui avait tricoté: c'était de grands trésors' (144). But if no-one is there to appreciate it then her efforts have been fruitless, as we see when she buys a second-hand table and excitedly waits for Maurice's reaction, only to find that his response is lukewarm (143 - 144). No rearrangement of the domestic space can recreate the magic of earlier years. In fact, housework and her role as housewife satisfy Monique less and less towards the latter stages of her self-examination. Although she was formerly house-proud, as her hopes of Maurice leaving Noëllie diminish, she neglects herself and the apartment and enters a period of severe depression. Objects which were once charged with significance are now stripped bare of meaning. The most mundane of the domestic chores, which previously made her feel better because they lulled her with their routine, now represent a great effort:

Quel courage inutile, pour les plus simples choses, quand le goût de vivre est perdu!  
Le soir, je prépare la théière, la tasse, la casserole, je dispose chaque chose à sa place pour que, le matin, la vie reprenne avec le moins d'effort possible. Et c'est quand même presque insurmontable de sortir de mes draps, de réveiller la journée.

(Beauvoir, 1968: 235)



Beauvoir's protagonists Murielle and Monique suffer psychologically once their children have grown up and left home, but working women who still have young children to look after frequently suffer from a magnified sense of guilt. Maryvonne's visit to the hairdresser in Paimpol immediately precipitates sharp self-criticism:

Je suis moche, et mal habillée. L'odeur de guimauve et d'ammoniaque, qui flotte dans cette atmosphère intime, me pique les narines.[...] Je suis mal à l'aise. Je vais repartir. Trop tard. Une jeune femme moulée dans un jean blanc et savamment maquillée me prend en main. (Letessier, 1980: 94)

The heroine of Brégeon's *Une journée inutile*, Suzanne, also finds it very difficult to temporarily abdicate responsibility for her children and husband. Just as Suzanne's desire to withhold her labour is fierce, an equally strong sense of duty prevents her from lasting any longer than a day in bed. She swings like a pendulum between conflicting poles of emotion, hating her husband one minute, craving his attention the next, behaving violently towards her children then attempting feeble reconciliations. She is torn between her identities as mother and artist, feeling guilty about neglecting her painting, feeling guilty when she paints because she is neglecting her children. Suzanne resents the monotonous cycle of preparing the breakfast, doing the dishes, making the beds, going to the shops and taking the children to school but she is unable to relinquish her control over the home. She has to stop herself when she hears Paulo has not flushed the toilet (Brégeon, 1966: 12), and later, when she hears Pierre making lunch for the children, she is frustrated at the thought that he is probably using the best olive oil for frying (61).

In Suzanne we see a woman who is unable to cope physically and emotionally with the multiple roles she is expected to assume. In the same way that Maurice encourages Monique ('La Femme rompue') to take a part-time job, Pierre urges Suzanne to continue with

her painting, while simultaneously expecting her to fulfil all the duties of a full-time housekeeper:

Et sa manie de me demander trente-six mille choses à la fois Et tu feras ci Et tu feras ça Et tu iras là Et n'oublie pas la Sécurité Sociale Et tu n'es pas allée chercher mon costume faut-il que j'y aille, et parle à la maîtresse de Paulo et tu ne devrais pas permettre à Gisèle de faire du vélo dans la rue et tu devrais lire ça. (Brégeon, 1966: 39)

Maurice and Pierre were content to be passively waited on by their slavishly devoted wives while never actively participating in domestic chores. They stood by as their partners cut short their education and with it their career prospects. But now the men, who find their wives uninspiring, fail to rationally consider the circumstances that have turned them into domestic drones. There is an impossible double standard here in that the women are expected to be perfect wives and mothers within the home and yet remain cultivated enough to be successful outside the home too. Suzanne's decision to spend the day in bed is her way of responding to these pressures. Significantly, it is a hostile male critic who finds her mini revolt pitiful:

Nous assistons à la révolte de la ménagère fomentant, à l'abri de ses draps pour barricade, sa minuscule émeute personnelle contre l'assommante condition de la femme au foyer. On la comprend. Seulement, si Suzanne a le courage de dire merde, elle n'a pas celui de tout balancer vraiment: elle n'a pas lu Christiane Rochefort. Elle n'a pas l'idée d'élargir le cadre de sa révolte. Femme, elle demeure «conditionnée» par la morale régnante, par les habitudes sociales, et surtout par cette dépendance physique à l'égard de son mâle — dépendance qui la comble. La révolte s'apaise sur l'oreiller. Les barricades tombent, ce n'est pas encore aujourd'hui qu'on aura pris la Bastille. (Bory, 1966: 48)

Surprisingly, Suzanne's crisis lasts only one day. The novel ends on a less defiant note than it begins when the couple are reconciled on the pillow. In reality, it is too late for Suzanne to revolutionise the household. She lost her chance when she put her painting aside in order to take care of her family. One critic, Janick Arbois, writing a review of the novel in *Signes du Temps*, draws attention to this missed opportunity:

Elle peint et elle a cru à un moment de sa vie que la peinture était pour elle quelque chose d'essentiel. Puis le mariage, les enfants, les travaux de chaque jour l'ont peu à peu absorbée, enlisée. Quand elle se révolte il est trop tard. Sa vie est victime d'un sournois et lent sabotage. (Arbois, 1966: 29)

Certainly, as the title of the novel implies, Suzanne's is a half-hearted rebellion. However, the double-edged implication is that every day is a useless day for a housewife when viewed in the wider scheme of things. Brégeon's novel highlights the difficulties of negating a lifetime of social conditioning, of admitting that your whole absurd existence as a housewife consists of an unappreciated routine of petty and undemanding tasks. The simplest illustration of the dishcloth crying out to be used — 'Chaque fois que je vois cette lavette je suis tentée de la prendre et de laver la vaisselle. Pourquoi? [...] Quelque chose grelotte en moi et dit bêtement: Tu devrais laver la vaisselle' (89) — is a pathetic symbol of years of discipline impossible to erase.

And yet, by creating a capricious and unreliable narrator, Brégeon is insinuating that Suzanne is not just a victim of her circumstances. Suzanne's monologue is full of contradictions and since it is a first person narration, there is no objective corroboration of events. Like Beauvoir's Monique, she is guilty of *mauvaise foi*. The portrayal of Pierre as an exacting tyrant is at odds with her earlier claims that he takes charge of certain household chores (38, 40) or that when she produces a good painting Pierre rejoices (23). Like

Maurice, Pierre emerges with some credit. But whether because of or in spite of her flaws, Suzanne succeeds in arousing the reader's compassion. The portrait of a woman who is profoundly disillusioned with marriage and motherhood is both credible, persuasive and painfully familiar.

Only two years before *Une journée inutile* was published, Betty Friedan's account of the psychological traumas suffered by suburban housewives, *The Feminine Mystique*, was translated for French readers by Yvette Roudy. Roudy recognised that the frustrated housewife was not just an American phenomenon and in her book *A Cause d'elles*, she wrote:

Ces femmes dans leurs belles maisons de banlieues proches de New York, qui toutes avaient fait des études supérieures mais avaient choisi de se consacrer à la carrière du mari et l'éducation de leurs enfants et qui se découvraient souffrant d'un mal mystérieux, je les reconnaissais. Je les voyais tous les jours autour de moi. C'étaient mes voisines de palier [...]

Ces femmes essayaient bravement d'obéir à la mode du retour au foyer et de faire face à la situation qu'elles avaient choisie. [...] Cette souffrance de vivre au-dessous de ses capacités n'était pas un mal réservé aux Américaines. Plus sournoisement il progressait chez nous. J'ai été le témoin de crises graves. J'ai vu des tentatives de suicide et des suicides. (Roudy, 1985: 76-77)

The protagonists discussed here are all expected to provide domestic labour without pay because society sees fit that some members of the community should oil the domestic wheels unpaid. This basic social hierarchy which confirms housewives in their inferiority leads Delphy to view women who do housework as one class. As illustrated by the novels, women of different social groups are subject to different social pressures, yet they are united in their general frustration with a full-time job in the home which is unappreciated and which

attracts no monetary remuneration, but is vital to the smooth functioning of capitalist society. The language used to describe housework, notably in slogans, emphasises its secondariness and its baseness.<sup>24</sup> As for housewives themselves, the adjective commonly used to describe them is 'obsessive'. Oakley (1974: 94-95), reviewing the derogatory epithets employed to characterise domestic labour concludes that housework demeans women, turning them into neurotics preoccupied with trifles. Full-time housewives find themselves trapped in a vicious circle. Isolation, boredom, feelings of uselessness and financial necessity may impel the woman to take a second job outside the home, but this is not necessarily a solution, especially since most of the work that is accessible to women is part-time, low-paid and unrewarding. If women ignore Beauvoir's advice and decide to remain at home they are acquiescing in their oppression by carrying out menial tasks that few men would deign to do: 'Papa dit que c'est pas mon travail'<sup>25</sup> ; 'Non mais tu m'imagines avec un tablier peut-être! Le genre de ton père, pas le mien!'<sup>26</sup> They are also accepting conditions of work that few men would tolerate:

Ce n'est pas balayer ou torcher le bébé qui est mesquin, dégradant, c'est balayer angoissée à l'idée de tout le linge qu'on a encore à repasser; repasser en se disant que ça ne sera jamais prêt pour le repas du soir; voir sans cesse différé le moment où l'on pourrait s'occuper des enfants. [...] Ce qui est humiliant, c'est de faire un travail qu'aucun homme ne consentirait à faire, de faire un travail qu'au moins la moitié de l'humanité regarde de haut, ne regarde même pas. (Leclerc, 1974: 95)

Working full-time in the home has adverse repercussions on a woman's mental health. For her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan set out to discover whether the happy housewife existed. In one upper-income housing development, she interviewed

<sup>24</sup>For example, in *Une journée inutile*, Suzanne finds this sort of advertising humiliating: 'Vivez mieux ou quelque chose comme ça en achetant le fer à repasser X. A l'idée de vivre mieux en achetant le fer à repasser X, je suis effondrée. Non pas qu'il repasse mal, bien au contraire, il repasse même très bien, mais qu'est-ce que ça change?' (Brégeon, 1966: 74).

<sup>25</sup>Patrick, *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*. See Rochefort, 1961: 133.

<sup>26</sup>Narrator's husband, *La Femme gelée*. See Ernaux, 1981: 130-131.

twenty-eight wives. She found that 'Sixteen out of the twenty-eight were in analysis or analytical psychotherapy. Eighteen were taking tranquilizers; several had tried suicide; and some had been hospitalized for varying periods, for depression or vaguely diagnosed psychotic states' (Friedan, 1963: 235). Furthermore, housework is never-ending because it perpetuates itself. Leclerc attempts to valorise housework in *Parole de femme* by comparing it to work on the production line and arguing that the latter is more humiliating:

Faire la vaisselle, éplucher les légumes, laver le linge, repasser, épousseter,  
balayer, nettoyer les carreaux, torcher les enfants, leur donner à manger,  
raccorder un pantalon usé [...] Travail mesquin? sombre? ingrat? stérile?  
dégradant? Qu'en dit le travailleur à la chaîne? Le visseur de boulons? le trieur de  
fiches, le tamponneur de timbres? la couturière à l'usine de confection? Et tant, tant  
d'autres? (Leclerc, 1974: 94)

However, even these men are paid and are free to clock off at the end of the day. Full-time housewives, on the other hand, never leave their place of work nor do they ever clock off: there is always something to do. Women are propelled by guilt, duty to their family and a need to be doing something useful. Leclerc (1974: 94) draws attention to the rewards of housework, 'La maison se prend d'un air de fête, le repas sent bon, l'enfant gazouille, ses fesses soyeuses à l'air, et pour une heure d'application rêveuse, le pantalon usé fera bien encore une année', but these attractions pall when compared to the remuneration of the factory worker. His pay packet reassures him that his work has a recognised market value. Attempts to calculate the cost of domestic labour, if it were remunerated, reveal the extent to which patriarchal society profits from the work carried out by housewives. *Quid 1999* puts the figure at over 12,000 French francs for a family of four per month.<sup>27</sup> A feminist analysis

<sup>27</sup> See Frémy, 1999: 574: 'Femme au foyer. Coût du temps passé par mois (famille de 4 personnes): cuisine 90 h par mois (soit au prix du Smic au 1-4-1998 un salaire d'environ 3548,7 F), ménage 104 h (4100,7 F), soins de santé et d'hygiène 60 h (2365,8 F), couture 24 h (946,32 F), gestion du budget familial et divers 40 h (1577,2 F). Total 318 h: 12538,74 F.'

of the number of hours a French housewife dedicates to household chores each week is contained in the invective, 'On n'appelle pas ça du travail' printed at the end of this chapter.

Legal and economic changes have advanced the situation of French women in the public domain, but, in spite of these developments, there has not been a similar evolution in the domestic domain. Even those women who are active outside the home spend on average two or three hours more than their husbands doing housework each day, according to recent studies.<sup>28</sup> The same study shows that full-time housewives daily spend three hours more than working women on domestic chores and are helped even less by their husbands. This is because men who are the sole wage-earners feel obliged to spend much longer at the office. Inevitably, the more children there are in the family, the more time a husband will spend at work to cope with the financial pressures. For mothers who work, claim Bihr and Pfefferkorn (1996: 113), the opposite is true: women are more likely to reduce the number of hours they work outside the home in order to deal with the increased domestic responsibility that a larger family brings. Sadly, it seems that as long as this unequal gender presence in the home endures, and as long as housework is perceived by both sexes to be essentially a woman's responsibility, then inequalities between men and women will persist both inside and outside the home.

### **'On n'appelle pas ça du travail'<sup>29</sup>**

1. Se lever les premières.  
Biberon, couche.
2. Leur faire le petit déjeuner.

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<sup>28</sup>See Bihr and Pfefferkorn, 1996: 112.

<sup>29</sup>From *Le Torchon brûle* (1970), no.1. See Laubier (ed.), 1990: 87.

3. Faire la vaisselle du petit déjeuner.
4. Habiller et emmener les enfants à l'école.
5. Faire les courses pour le repas.  
Biberon, couche.
6. Faire le ménage.
7. Préparer le déjeuner.
8. Les faire manger, faire leur vaisselle.
9. Faire la lessive.
10. Repasser, raccommoder, faire les vitres, récurer, brosser,  
épousseter, cirer...
11. Les attendre.
12. Se faire une beauté pour eux.
13. Préparer le repas du soir.
14. Les servir.  
Biberon, couche.
15. Laver leur vaisselle.
16. Préparer tout pour le lendemain.
17. Se coucher, et être à SA disposition.

70 HEURES = ON N'APPELLE PAS ÇA DU TRAVAIL.

Il nous disent que nous ne gagnons pas notre vie, nous sommes justes nourries et logées et encore, il faut dire merci.

Si nous travaillons dehors c'est TOUT ÇA PLUS 8 HEURES DE TRAVAIL PAR JOUR, PLUS CAVALER DANS LE MÉTRO pour faire les courses avant la fermeture.

NOUS: 110 HEURES

EUX: 48 HEURES de travail par semaine

Ils nous disent que nous gagnons un salaire d'appoint!!!



SI C'EST ÇA L'AMOUR

SI C'EST ÇA LA FAMILLE

, CHANGEONS-LES!

#### **4. O. S. TOUTE SA VIE, C'EST PAS UNE VIE<sup>1</sup>**

In this chapter we shall focus on how the traps which circumscribe women's horizons at school and within the home are not merely replicated but are also reinforced in the workplace. In *Les Ouvrières*, Danièle Kergoat's study of working-class women, the sociologist draws a depressing analogy between women's work both inside and outside the home: 'Les emplois féminins sont souvent une prolongation des rôles domestiques' (Kergoat, 1982: 15). The writings by Weil, Etcherelli and Letessier that I have chosen to examine illustrate the gruelling and exhausting physical work carried out by women on the factory floor. We shall see that the research carried out by Danièle Kergoat, Pascal Lainé, Pierrette Sartin and Evelyne Sullerot serves to amplify Weil's journalistic account of factory life. Their objective testimony is also poignantly corroborated in the novels by Etcherelli and Letessier. The pessimistic conclusion that emerges would seem to be that, to a large extent, the vicious circle of menial and mind-destroying chores that women habitually carry out at home is repeated at work. The more this work resembles domestic work, the less it is paid.

Since the industrial revolution, the lives of the working classes and the conditions in which they lived and worked have been the subjects of a number of novels.<sup>3</sup> However, although literary movements of the 1920s and 1930s such as the *roman populiste* and *littérature prolétarienne*<sup>4</sup> engendered a proliferation of texts describing the lives of ordinary

<sup>1</sup>See Letessier, 1983: 70. During a strike Loïca carries a placard with the words: "OS toute sa vie, c'est pas une vie!" OS is an abbreviation of 'ouvrier spécialisé' (unskilled worker).

<sup>2</sup>See Letessier, 1983: 70. During a strike Loïca carries a placard with the words: "OS toute sa vie, c'est pas une vie!" OS is an abbreviation of 'ouvrier spécialisé' (unskilled worker).

<sup>3</sup>See Poole, 1994: 27-37 for a brief overview.

<sup>4</sup>One of the essential differences between these two movements is that the founder of 'littérature prolétarienne', Henri Poulaille, distanced himself from the populist movement by promoting works written by the working classes themselves.

working people, it is striking that very few fictional or sociological texts have focused specifically on the experiences of the working-class woman:

Le moins qu'on puisse dire est que le travail industriel des femmes n'a jamais été un thème privilégié par les sociologues. [...] Certes, les sociologues décrivaient des tâches et des postes du travail féminin mais sans jamais problématiser le fait que l'on retrouvait toujours des femmes — et seulement des femmes — à certains postes de travail, dans certains ateliers, à certaines tâches. (Kergoat, 1982: 39)

The fictional exception to this generalisation is, of course, Émile Zola, whom Etcherelli consciously alludes to as an important influence.<sup>5</sup> Zola's celebrated works *L'Assommoir* (1877) and *Au bonheur des dames* (1883) are amongst the few novels in which a working-class woman plays a pivotal role.<sup>6</sup> Through his characterisation of Gervaise, who works as a laundress in the *Goutte-d'Or* district of Paris, we are allowed an insight into the types of home-based industries women were involved in during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Zola chose a woman as his central character was unusual and progressive because at that time the main protagonists were generally young men seeking their fortune in the big city.<sup>8</sup> Although Zola carried out scrupulous research into working-class life at the time, left-wing critics and readers who were working-class themselves felt that his characters were crude caricatures based on bourgeois assumptions. It is thanks to the work of twentieth-century French women writers such as Weil, Etcherelli and Letessier that this lacuna has been rectified.

<sup>5</sup>See the section 'The worm's eye view of the factory floor' for Etcherelli's comments on Zola.

<sup>6</sup>Another exception is *L'Atelier de Marie-Claire* by Marguerite Audoux, published in 1920. Audoux was a seamstress and although she did not have the class consciousness of other writers of the period, her four novels allow the reader a glimpse of the living and working conditions experienced by girls and women from humble backgrounds. In *L'Atelier de Marie-Claire* the reader is allowed a glimpse of how life was before protective employment laws came into force: female factory workers are laid off in slack periods while girls as young as twelve years old work alongside their mothers on the factory floor. See Teghey, 1995 for further details on Audoux.

<sup>7</sup>See Furst, 1990: 5 for further details.

<sup>8</sup>See Furst, 1990: 6.

## A SOCIALIST EXPERIMENT: WEIL'S 'JOURNAL D'USINE'

Simone Weil, whose 'Journal d'usine' was published in *La Condition ouvrière* in 1951, is a superb example of a *bourgeoise* who made a conscious effort to experience the grim existential reality of life for factory workers. A successful academic from a middle-class Jewish family, Weil was a committed socialist and an active member of various revolutionary groups. Such was her dedication that she felt the only way to truly understand social injustice and exploitation was to abandon home comforts in order to experience working-class life at first hand. She became a factory worker at the notorious Alsthom, then at Carnaud (ironworks) and finally at Renault, choosing to live in the same material conditions as other workers and voluntarily isolating herself from her family. However, like Zola, she faced criticism in some quarters. Albertine Thévenon, a fellow revolutionary and author of the introduction to Weil's journal, explains how she felt Weil's decision to learn about working-class conditions by becoming a worker herself was flawed:

Ce fut un gros point de friction entre nous deux. Je pensais et je pense encore que l'état de prolétaire est un état de fait et non de choix. [...] Je n'ai aucune sympathie pour les expériences genre «roi charbon» où le fils du patron vient travailler incognito dans les mines de son père pour retourner, son expérience faite, reprendre sa vie de patron. (Weil, 1951: 10)

Thévenon's point is valid but politically retrograde since she denies the possibility of sociological empathy across the classes. Despite her reservations, however, Thévenon, like many of Weil's friends at the time, could not help admiring Weil's idealism and the personal sacrifices she endured in order to make her experience of working-class life as authentic as possible. From an early age, Weil was passionately concerned about human suffering. Beauvoir, who was at the Sorbonne at the same time as Weil, remembers being told how Weil had wept at the news that a famine was devastating China. Impressed, Beauvoir was

anxious to get to know her and their first meeting is recounted in *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*. Beauvoir's description not only highlights Weil's compassion and profound social conscience, but it also accentuates how differently these two young women evolved intellectually and politically. Their middle-class backgrounds may have been similar, but their theoretical and literary approaches were starkly opposed:

Je réussis un jour à l'approcher. Je ne sais plus comment la conversation s'engagea; elle déclara d'un ton tranchant qu'une seule chose comptait aujourd'hui sur terre: la Révolution qui donnerait à manger à tout le monde. Je rétorquai, de façon non moins péremptoire, que le problème n'était pas de faire le bonheur des hommes, mais de trouver un sens à leur existence. Elle me toisa: «On voit bien que vous n'avez jamais eu faim», dit-elle. [...] Je compris qu'elle m'avait cataloguée «une petite bourgeoise spiritualiste» et je m'en irritai. (Beauvoir, 1958: 330-331)

The essential distinction between Beauvoir and Weil is that Beauvoir's theoretical solutions to woman's secondary status in society gloss over the day-to-day imperatives of many women's lives and overlook the fact that they are imprisoned by their social class and financial circumstances. Weil, on the other hand, validates working-class experience.

Weil's 'Journal d'usine' is a remarkable record in note form of her personal experiences as a factory worker from 1934 to 1935, it exposes the atrocious conditions suffered by the workers and describes the brutalising and demoralising environment of the factory. Weil does not deal specifically with conditions endured by women: she appears more preoccupied with class inequalities and the treatment of the working classes in general. Nonetheless, the reader can draw some dispiriting conclusions about the position of women within the factory. All the positions of seniority or responsibility are held by men, women do the most repetitive and monotonous tasks, and they are both segregated from, and held in contempt by, the male workers: '[Remarque: séparation des sexes, mépris des hommes

pour les femmes, réserve des femmes à l'égard des hommes (malgré les échanges de plaisanteries obscènes) bien plus prononcés chez les ouvriers qu'ailleurs]' (Weil, 1951: 83).

The litany is familiar, the hierarchy described often obtains today. Instances of the constraints faced by women at home abound in Weil's account. One drill operator is forced to leave her nine-year-old son in the unheated cloakroom all day because her seriously ill husband is unable to take care of him (69). Another young woman speaks wistfully of happier times when she did not have so many domestic obligations:

Une belle fille, forte, fraîche et saine dit un jour au vestiaire, après une journée de 10h.: On en a marre de la journée. Vivement le 14 juillet qu'on danse. Moi: Vous pouvez penser à danser après 10h. de boulot? Elle: Bien sûr! Je danserais toute la nuit, etc. (en riant). Puis, sérieusement: ça fait 5 ans que je n'ai pas dansé. On a envie de danser, et puis on danse devant la lessive. (Weil, 1951: 83)

There is a note of black comedy in the image of Weil's colleague dancing around her washing, and dark humour will be a trademark of Letessier. What is most striking about Weil's account is the constant reminder of how factory work takes its toll on the workers' physical and mental wellbeing: 'Mal de tête très violent, travail accompli en pleurant presque sans arrêt' (40); 'Non seulement chaleur intolérable, mais les flammes vont jusqu'à vous lécher les mains et les bras' (42); 'L'une de nous a une bronchite chronique, au point qu'elle doit se faire mettre des ventouses tous les deux jours' (47); 'Bouts des doigts sanglants' (60); 'Sens profondément l'humiliation de ce vide imposé à la pensée' (66). There appears to be no regard for the health and safety of employees and accidents in the workplace occur frequently. A female employee who has a whole section of hair pulled out by a machine is back at work in the afternoon despite her considerable discomfort (47). Weil's own health deteriorates significantly while she is a factory worker and her morale is so low during this period that even her weekends are spent gloomily contemplating her oppressive existence:

Je vais à pied jusqu'à la Seine; là je m'assieds sur une pierre, morne, épuisée et le cœur serré par la rage impuissante, me sentant vidée de toute ma substance vitale; je me demande si, au cas où je serais condamnée à cette vie, j'arriverais à traverser tous les jours la Seine sans me jeter une fois dedans. (Weil, 1951: 81-82)

The fact that even the spirited Weil can contemplate suicide is a damning indictment of her working conditions. It is also deeply ironic that, despite the mindlessness of factory shifts, factory work insidiously corrodes the analytical powers of the workers during their free time. Like Weil, the heroine of Letessier's *Le Voyage à Paimpol*, Maryvonne, finds that her weekends are invaded by thoughts of the factory: 'On ne fait jamais l'amour le dimanche soir. On s' imagine déjà à l'usine. La gorge nouée. On craint de bouger, d'accélérer l'écoulement des heures' (Letessier, 1980: 23).

It is evident from her *journal* that Weil finds the absence of intellectual stimulation in the factory very hard to bear. She is mildly contemptuous of her female colleagues who talk of little other than '[les] misères de l'existence' (Weil, 1951: 79) and it is only on one occasion — when she meets two male workers with whom she is able to discuss literature and politics — that she records having had an interesting conversation (78-80).

Weil's methods of research may have been more rigorous than Zola's; they certainly required considerable personal abnegation. However, it is clear that her social class and level of education made it impossible for her to become fully integrated into this particular working-class milieu. While she understands how factory work encourages resignation (107) and inhibits free thinking, 'C'est seulement le samedi après-midi et le dimanche que [...] je me souviens que je suis *aussi* un être pensant' (51), she fails to make the correlation between this mind-numbing work and the fact that her female colleagues are feeble conversationalists. Her ironic Cartesian allusion reinforces her growing sense of disillusionment with the soul-destroying environment of the factory. Letessier's fictional

heroine, Maryvonne, similarly despairs of her colleagues' banality: 'Je suis cernée par les cancers, les accidents et les suicides. Il y a toujours quelqu'un pour qui pleurer. Je ne sais plus que faire de tous ces récits tragiques. J'en attrape la migraine. Toute cette misère me démolit' (Letessier, 1980: 83). Again, the reader infers that a sharp analysis of their circumstances might enable the women to develop methods of improving their existential situation.

## GENDER AND HEALTH

The theme of women's ill-health is a recurrent one in the novels. Laurence in Beauvoir's *Les Belles Images* suffers from anorexia; Cardinal's narrator in *Les Mots pour le dire* has gynaecological and psychiatric problems; Céline in Rochefort's *Les Stances à Sophie*, Monique in Beauvoir's *La Femme rompue* and Elsa in Cardinal's *Les Grands Désordres* all have nervous breakdowns. However, the working-class women in my chosen texts are particularly debilitated. They are commonly depicted as beleaguered and careworn characters who carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. The women who live in Josyane's neighbourhood in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* are beset with kidney problems, cancers and tumours; the female employees in 'Journal d'usine', *Le Voyage à Paimpol* and *Loïca* are bronchitic, tubercular, suffer from varicose veins, have violent and drunken husbands or have lost children in accidents:

Anne-Louise souffre plus encore à cause de son diabète, de ses varices, de son cholestérol, de son voile au poumon, de son hypertension, de son eczéma et de la «totale» qui n'a rien à voir dans l'affaire mais qu'elle n'oublie jamais de citer dans le catalogue de ses misères personnelles, sans compter les embêtements divers qui l'empêchent de dormir, lui coupent l'appétit, lui portent sur le système et lui tapent sur les lacrymales. (Letessier, 1983: 57)



In *Elise ou la vraie vie*, the factory lunch break sees Etcherelli's female characters collapse exhausted onto the cloakroom benches as they endeavour to soothe their tired and aching limbs:

Le travail, la fatigue, la faim, le bruit mettaient le corps à la torture; l'estomac, les jambes, les tempes, la nuque, ces quatre points les plus vulnérables, se fondaient jusqu'à vous laisser l'impression de n'être qu'un unique membre douloureux.

(Etcherelli, 1967: 172-173)

Elise does not need Arezki to remind her that it is the factory that dehumanises the workers (Etcherelli, 1967: 102). She has proof when she leaves the shop floor briefly to visit the infirmary. Here she is struck by the contrasting environments. The narrative changes rhythm completely to illustrate the warmth and calm of her surroundings and the gentle, unhurried actions of the nurse:

L'infirmerie tiède, ensoleillée, où il y avait des objets humains, la bouilloire, la vapeur en spirales, un évier carrelé de blanc, des verres, me fit prendre en horreur le monde disproportionné de l'atelier, la chaîne, les piliers métalliques et l'odeur de l'essence chaude. (Etcherelli, 1967: 103)

In *Le Voyage à Paimpol*, Maryvonne feels under pressure to provide her doctor with a list of physical symptoms — 'Je tombe dans les pommes, j'ai des crampes dans les membres, je ne supporte plus rien, tout m'énerve, je pleure pour des bricoles' (Letessier, 1980: 16) — because she is conscious that mere stress and exhaustion will not affect the readings of the doctor's examining instruments. It is the unseen and debilitating effects of factory life that cause the women the most anguish. For example, although the hours pass slowly during the shift, the ageing process seems to be accelerated by the conditions of

work. When Maryvonne looks in the bathroom mirror of her hotel room in Paimpol, she sees a 'vieille femme fatiguée au regard vague' (Letessier, 1980: 41). As far as Maryvonne is concerned, she has sacrificed the very essence of her being to the assembly line: 'Demain il faudra se relever, frustré de chaleur et de sommeil. Se lever à la sonnerie impérative du réveil, pour avoir froid. Se quitter soi-même et se donner à l'usine, la mort dans l'âme' (Letessier, 1980: 75).

As the principal carers in society and the buffers for family stress and anxiety, women frequently have to cope with domestic crises. They share their problems with their workmates in order to gain emotional support, but Weil, Etcherelli and Letessier show that there are no formal structures of any kind to absorb the tensions. In the cold, steely and joyless environment of the factory the women's own wretchedness is reinforced by their surroundings and mirrored in the faces of their colleagues.

## THE WORM'S EYE VIEW OF THE FACTORY FLOOR

Sara Poole who briefly discusses Weil's *La Condition ouvrière* in her critical guide to Etcherelli's *Elise ou la vraie vie* quotes from a letter Weil wrote to the managing director of a factory in the months following her own experience as an industrial worker:

Autre remarque, que je mets par écrit pour que vous puissiez la méditer. En tant qu'ouvrière, j'étais dans une situation doublement inférieure, exposée à sentir ma dignité blessée non seulement par les chefs, mais aussi par les ouvriers, du fait que je suis une femme. (Poole, 1994: 38)

The excerpt demonstrates that Weil was conscious of gender inequalities yet disappointingly, she does not develop this particular angle in 'Journal d'usine'. The

development of the feminist perspective marks out the texts by Etcherelli and Letessier as particularly valuable. Their sharpness of focus is accentuated by the fact that their knowledge of deprivation is drawn from bitter experience. Both are of working-class origin, both worked on the assembly line and both foreground the under-represented working-class woman in their novels. This approach is especially refreshing because the images of working women generally portrayed in the media and in literature are not particularly representative:

L'image communément admise de la femme au travail, par exemple dans la presse féminine, c'est par prédilection l'image de la bourgeoise, de préférence jeune, qui «fait carrière». Professeur, médecin, avocate. A la rigueur institutrice ou secrétaire de direction. C'est encore l'attachée de presse, l'hôtesse, la vendeuse dans un magasin de luxe. Jamais l'O. S., la monteuse à la chaîne, la vendeuse de Monoprix. (Lainé, 1974: 134)

We may wryly note that these middle-class images are selected in order to convey a spirit of facile optimism as opposed to the images in my chosen texts which invite critical feminist dissection by the reader. Etcherelli's and Letessier's representations of women workers are not totally objective, but they approach the subject of work from a completely different perspective. They and their heroines know what it is to have 'les mains sales'. And because of their social backgrounds, neither writer can be accused of romanticising working-class life or of creating stereotypical working-class characters out of ignorance. In fact, this is one of the reasons Etcherelli felt her book *Elise ou la vraie vie* was appreciated by factory workers themselves:

[Les travailleurs] étaient heureux qu'on ait parlé de leur vie parce que dans la littérature française le mot «ouvrier» est assez négligé. Lorsqu'on voit un ouvrier dans un livre, c'est toujours un peu une image pittoresque, folklorique et alors on le

caricature en en faisant un personnage misérabiliste ou comique. Mais c'est toujours un personnage de second plan. Enfin, on n'a jamais essayé, je crois, à part bien sûr certains écrivains, et je pense à Zola, mais Zola, c'est quand même différent, c'est le XIXe siècle. Je crois qu'on n'a pas souvent essayé de comprendre les problèmes des travailleurs parce que la plupart du temps les écrivains sont issus de milieux bourgeois et s'intéressent d'abord aux problèmes de leur société, de leur classe, de leur entourage. (Etcherelli, 1974: 6)

Etcherelli breaks away from the caricatural stereotype by using the fictional form to examine class issues through the eyes of a central working-class character. Moreover, her consciousness-raising novels break out of the claustrophobic bourgeois ambience onto the stirring activities and pressures of a crowded factory floor, thereby opening up new sociological perspectives. Her point that the stock image of the working classes is completely skewed is underlined by Letessier in *Le Voyage à Paimpol*. Letessier's central character, Maryvonne, tells a middle-class Parisian couple staying in the same hotel in Paimpol that she works in a factory. There follows an embarrassed silence and Maryvonne reads in their pitying faces that they have a textbook knowledge of *la condition ouvrière*. The opening line indicates the heroine's deep humiliation as she senses that she is being scrutinised:

S'ils continuent à me dévisager comme ça, je leur dis qu'il est interdit de donner à manger aux animaux. A croire que pour eux les ouvriers n'existent que dans les discours. On étudie leurs soi-disant aspirations et destin historique dans les livres, mais on n'en rencontre jamais. [...] Il m'imagine probablement me débattant dans des enfers de feu et d'acier et sortant exténuée de l'usine le soir pour aller retrouver ma pauvre famille dans une vieille bicoque bourrée de cafards. (Letessier, 1980: 92).

When *Elise ou la vraie vie* was first published, the writer Claude Lanzmann, an intimate friend of Beauvoir, recommended that she read the novel. Beauvoir immediately responded to its authenticity. For her, the book not only raised the familiar romantic theme of a forbidden love but also testified to the strenuousness of life on the assembly line: 'Tout en décrivant le monde du travail — dont les romans parlent si rarement — il racontait une belle et tragique histoire d'amour entre un Algérien et une Française, dans le Paris de 1957, malade de racisme' (Beauvoir, 1972: 79). Both Lanzmann and Beauvoir found it remarkable that a working-class woman had managed to write a novel while working full-time and bringing up her two sons alone. In an article in *Elle* magazine in November 1967, Lanzmann gave an account of Etcherelli's humble beginnings and her struggle to write her first novel:

Venue à Paris, elle a connu Citroën, l'usine de roulement à billes SKF — son travail consistait à mirer à la lumière d'une lampe à arc de minuscules cylindres d'acier pour en déceler les pailles éventuelles —, l'entreprise «Lavaupoids» à Pantin, les travaux de nuit, les ménages — «C'est mieux que la chaîne, dit-elle, on a presque l'impression d'avoir un 'chez-soi'» — et les sanatoria. Mais l'écrivain qui était en elle ne pouvait pas s'arrêter. Pendant quatre années, malgré la fatigue, la misère, l'anéantissement, elle a travaillé à *Elise ou la vraie vie*. (Lanzmann, 1967: 82)

Etcherelli felt disappointed that the majority of reviewers concentrated on her authentic representation of working-class life and classed the novel as an autobiography, when she had hoped for greater recognition of her literary skills as a writer of fiction. This is almost certainly due to the fact that her novels work much better as testimony than as aesthetic works of fiction. The problem is exacerbated in *Un arbre voyageur*, which was classified as *littérature prolétarienne*<sup>9</sup> simply because Etcherelli had tackled certain issues in the course of the narrative. The author voiced her frustrations in an interview in *Libération*:

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<sup>9</sup>See Manceron, 1978: 27.

On fait des essais sur les 'cas sociaux', sur les 'gens non-intégrés' ou sur les 'femmes seules' etc.... On en fait des idées. Mais la littérature, qui est considérée comme un domaine noble, ne doit pas en parler: la littérature n'est intéressante qu'à partir d'un certain standing, quand les problèmes du quotidien sont occultés. [...] La littérature française, c'est un enclos. Si on en sort ce n'est plus de la littérature on appelle cela 'témoignage', 'tranches de vie'. (Lévy-Willard, 1978: 16)

Nonetheless, as Poole (1994: 11) points out, Etcherelli does recognise the value of art as testimony, and here I am solely concerned with her depiction of factory life and representations of working-class women. Her characters illustrate perfectly the paradox discussed in my introduction — that paid work is not a panacea. All of Etcherelli's protagonists endure harsh conditions in the workplace before a second equally oppressive shift starts at home. In many respects they are strengthened by their work experiences, but their status as full-time working women neither liberates them from the home nor does it empower them to challenge satisfactorily their secondary status with respect to male relatives, partners or bosses.

The relationships with men compound the drawbacks of their situation. Illustrations of this are many. In the Letellier household, all three of the women — the grandmother, Elise, Marie-Louise — work and support one man, Lucien. The grandmother cleans offices near the port (Etcherelli, 1967: 11), Marie-Louise works at the biscuit factory and Elise does a bit of typing and manages most of the housekeeping. This for them is the natural order of things. Although financially the women may be the breadwinners, domestically they still act as servants to their master Lucien, who, having drifted away from his studying, does absolutely nothing. He is one of those people who, in Elise's words, 'passent leur vie dans l'attente d'une occupation digne d'eux' (16). When Lucien does finally take a job in Paris, his own martyred attitude to the factory is described in mock heroic style as follows:

Je me suis trouvé dans la nécessité matérielle d'accepter un boulot pénible, mais combien exaltant. Je vais me mêler aux vrais combattants, partager la vie inhumaine des ouvriers d'usine. Au milieu des Bretons, des Algériens, des Polonais exilés, ou des Espagnols, je vais trouver le contact avec la seule réalité en mouvement. [...] Je témoignerai pour ceux qui ne peuvent le faire. (Etcherelli, 1967: 58-59)

Lucien's exalted, militaristic tones contrast with the initial down-to-earth observations of Elise. When she initially enters the factory, the first thing she notices is the unashamedly racist way in which immigrant workers are rudely told that there are no vacancies while she, on the other hand, is invited to step inside the office. Her dream had been to 'partir, vivre auprès de Lucien' and to experience 'Paris, la vraie vie, Lucien en usine' (59). Yet the reader is aware that Lucien has encouraged Elise to come to Paris not because he misses his sister but because he needs her financial support. No sooner has she arrived in Paris when Lucien warns her that funds were low, and she finds herself at the factory door. Elise, who acted as a surrogate mother for Lucien, and congratulated herself on not having to take the road to the factory, is ironically boxed in to factory work by the very brother for whom she had earlier sacrificed herself. 'La vraie vie' turns into the literal inferno of the factory floor.

Clémence, the eponymous heroine of the second novel, is equally easily manipulated by her partner, Villaderda. When his business is slow to develop, Clémence must constantly find alternative ways to tell him that no letters have arrived, that no-one has telephoned — all this in an attempt to appease him: 'Clémence possédait tout un jeu de formules pour dire qu'il n'y avait rien de neuf' (Etcherelli, 1971: 141). Again the woman is shown to resort to flattery in order to placate and keep the man in her life, exemplifying Beauvoir's classic pattern of female *mauvaise foi*. In Milie's case (*Un arbre voyageur*), she

gives up her job in order to spend more time with Georges<sup>10</sup>. However, his socialist principles and noble ideas on equality and solidarity are quickly forgotten when she finds that she is pregnant. Georges resigns himself to the fact that he is to become a father, but at the same time he keeps his distance, reminding Milie that it is her choice to have the child and that she must not forget that theirs is a 'libre association, [une] union sans garantie' (Etcherelli, 1978: 163).

Male exploitation is not compensated for by concomitant female solidarity. In *Elise ou la vraie vie*, the female clerical workers evince hostility by reminding Elise that she will not be getting an office job, and her attempts to make eye contact with the first woman she meets outside *atelier 76* are in vain: 'J'aurais aimé qu'elle me sourît. Mais elle regardait à travers moi' (Etcherelli, 1967: 76).

Weil makes a similar observation in 'Journal d'usine'. A female employee with tuberculosis who is forced to carry out an exceptionally onerous task is later sacked for doing it badly. Weil is astonished at the unhelpful reaction of the other women:

Pas un mot de sympathie des ouvrières, qui connaissent pourtant cet écoëurement devant une besogne où l'on s'épuise en sachant qu'on gagnera 2 fr. ou moins et qu'on sera engueulé pour avoir coulé le bon. [...] Ce manque de sympathie s'explique du fait qu'un «mauvais» boulot, s'il est épargné à une, est fait par une autre... (Weil, 1951: 38)

Lainé offers another possible explanation of this phenomenon in his chapter on working women in *La Femme et ses images*; namely that relations between women deteriorate when there is segregation of the sexes, which is extremely common in factories:

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<sup>10</sup>Just as Clémence sacrificed her job for Villaderda in *A propos de Clémence*.



Le problème se complique, dans le cas de l'atelier féminin, de ce que la ségrégation des sexes reproduit et confirme une ségrégation économique et sociale plus générale. Les femmes sont ensemble aux plus bas degrés de la hiérarchie professionnelle. Chaque travailleuse renvoie à ses compagnes l'image de leur propre sujétion, de leur ennui, de la médiocrité de leur sort. Alors le simple fait de pouvoir travailler avec des hommes (même sous leurs ordres) représente en lui-même une manière de promotion. (Lainé, 1974: 140)

The absence of feminist sisterhood documented in Etcherelli's novels greatly decreases the chances of any organised action to improve their condition. Letessier's novels, however, will paint a brighter picture.

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT

One of the effects of segregation is that sexual tension is increased when women and men do have to work together. As quality controller at the end of the assembly line, Elise is surrounded by male workers. Her arrival in *atelier 76* is greeted with whooping and yelling, forcing her to walk with her head lowered. She is told by Gilles, the foreman, that this happens each time a woman comes to this part of the factory. Lucien later tries to reassure her: 'A travailler comme ça, on retourne à l'état animal. Des bestiaux qui voient la femelle. On crie. C'est l'expression animale de leur plaisir. Ils ne sont pas méchants. Un peu collants avec les femmes parce qu'ils en manquent' (Etcherelli, 1967: 83). Elise is forced both to contend with being the sexual prey of the male workers around her, and to parry their repeated barbed queries why she, a mere woman, has been employed in quality control (78, 80). This is not only degrading for her but also means that if she is to gain any credibility she must work twice as hard as the men. Here we have the familiar pattern of the double standard.

In Letessier's *Loïca*, the heroine boldly endeavours to tackle the issues of sexual discrimination and harassment at source.<sup>11</sup> Like Elise, she was reminded of her sexuality when, on returning to the assembly line after her maternity leave, she was greeted with a wolf whistle (Letessier, 1983: 75). Like Letessier's first novel, *Le Voyage à Paimpol*, *Loïca* concentrates on factory life and the treatment of women in the workplace. The text marks a definite progress in the representation of working-class women in the factory, since Letessier's heroines struggle to achieve their own independence. In this novel, the female journalist narrator has been sent to Saint-Brieuc to interview Paul Gerbier, an important union delegate who is retiring from the metalwork factory. The journalist's story is pre-written: a straight encomium of her paper's view of the 'vraie vie' of this respected male trade unionist. However, the journalist suspends other activities in order to devote herself to the real unsung union heroine, Loïca. What subsequently emerges in Letessier's novel is a detective story in which the narrator becomes personally involved. Loïca, a prominent union member, has recently disappeared in disgrace. The journalist decides, instead of following male editorial diktat, to reconstruct the story, not of Paul, but of the woman who fought devotedly in the factory for the rights of both sexes: 'Où est Loïca? Quelle femme est-elle? Quelle est son histoire? Comment reconstituer le puzzle de sa vie?' (53).

The section of the narrative which covers the earlier part of Loïca's life centres on her sexual vulnerability and the dangers and troubles she is faced with as a sixteen-year-old girl looking for work in Paris. The middle-aged man she meets in a café and who offers her work right away is obviously not as interested in her qualifications as he is in seducing her:

«Vous me plaisez bien, jeune fille, j'aime les gens ouverts et disponibles...»

<sup>11</sup>Letessier does not just focus on the sexual treatment of women at work. Loïca's brother, Erwann, is a trainee mechanic in a garage, where the conditions of work are very harsh. His employer, Berthin, asserts his authority in the workplace by intimidating and verbally humiliating his employees. He not only physically abuses Erwann, but takes advantage of him sexually: '[Émile] a entendu la voix saccadée de Berthin: "Continue, continue, sale bête... continue, petit con, tu la garderas ta place, fumier de pédé... vas-y! Bon Dieu! Vas-y!" Émile s'est approché par curiosité. Berthin était debout contre le mur de tôle, la braguette ouverte, Erwann, à genoux. Émile s'est reculé honteux, comme si c'avait été lui.' (Letessier, 1983: 44).

Loïca sourit, cela ressemble à une mauvaise plaisanterie.

«... et souriants. C'est mon grand regret dans la vie, la solitude. Je suis veuf... enfin! On n'est pas là pour se lamenter. Et vous?» (Letessier, 1983: 141)

Loïca is naturally suspicious of his motives but, anxious to find a job, she cannot afford to be scrupulous, and having established the rate of pay, she begins work sticking addresses on envelopes. He pays Loïca extra — 'une prime de bonne conduite' (143) — and promises more, but his intentions are suspect. Sexual harassment and bribery does not induce her to prostitute herself and Letessier's poverty-stricken heroine takes her wage and leaves, showing commendable indifference to her material advancement. All her experiences at work illustrate the uncomfortable fact that women would achieve promotion and lead more affluent lives if they meekly acquiesced to their superiors' sexual advances. The women of these novels are sexual objects subjected to the lascivious gaze of the egregious predatory male.

## THE ASSEMBLY LINE

We turn now to the material conditions which crucially determine the quality of the working environment for our female protagonists. Etcherelli's description of the cacophonous din that the employees must endure every day of their working lives contributes to the image of the production line as a sort of hell on earth, continually seething with discordant sounds, intense heat and strong odours:

Les machines, les marteaux, les outils, les moteurs de la chaîne, les scies mêlaient leurs bruits infernaux et ce vacarme insupportable, fait de grondements, de sifflements, de sons aigus, déchirants pour l'oreille, me sembla tellement inhumain

que je crus qu'il s'agissait d'un accident, que, ces bruits ne s'accordant pas ensemble, certains allaient cesser. (Etcherelli, 1967: 76)

The deafening noise of the machinery stupefies Elise, who has already been alarmed by the men's taunts. Letessier too highlights this bombardment of the senses when her protagonist Loïca steps into the *atelier* for the first time: 'C'était un inextricable amas de ferraille et d'humains coupés en morceaux. Des mouvements sans suite, dans toutes les directions, un brouhaha incessant fait de mille bruits indescriptibles' (Letessier, 1983: 55). The image of human beings as fragmented pieces or morsels reinforces the idea that the assembly line is a huge monster rapidly devouring everything in sight and spewing out the final product of their labours. The striking animal metaphor is also employed by Etcherelli later on in *Elise ou la vraie vie*: 'La chaîne est un grand boa qui se déroule le long des murs. Une immense bouche vomit les carrosseries de l'atelier en peinture, étuve située à l'étage au-dessus qui, par un ascenseur, déverse sept voitures à l'heure' (Etcherelli, 1967: 120). The factory environment described in my chosen texts veers between extremes: it is unbearably noisy and relentlessly monotonous, it is either too hot or too cold: 'On voyait la buée sortir de nos bouches quand on parlait. Les pièces étaient glacées, on ne pouvait plus travailler. Il y a même une femme qui est tombée dans les pommes à cause du froid' (Letessier, 1980: 54). The fluctuations in temperature within the factory are also highlighted by Weil (1951: 47): 'Très froid, cette semaine. Grande inégalité de température selon les endroits de l'usine. [...] On passe d'une machine placée devant une bouche à air chaud, ou même d'un four, à une machine exposée aux courants d'air.' The writers' descriptions illuminate the pernicious effects of excessive noise and temperature by exposing the deleterious consequences of these conditions on the health of the female workers.

Weil, Etcherelli and Letessier place considerable emphasis on the tyrannical and inflexible rhythm of the assembly line, the pressures of maintaining the required pace and the threat of losing bonuses. Letessier (1983: 166) highlights one of the strategies employed to

ensure workers are not distracted from achieving their targets: workshops are built without windows. This deliberate claustrophobia is arguably worse for the women since it replicates that of their four walls at home.

In all of these texts, highly intricate work that demands small, repeated actions at a regularly accelerating tempo is shown to be carried out by women. Remarkably, such work is generally considered a soft option and one that is particularly suited to women. However, Sartin explains in *La Femme libérée?* that this type of work aggravates the nervous system and puts a particular strain on the eyes:

On considère comme des travaux légers convenant aux femmes des tâches qui exigent à la fois attention, rapidité et adresse, et qui, de ce fait sont particulièrement éprouvantes pour le système nerveux. Faire quinze mille perforations à l'heure sur une machine mécanographique, exécuter mille deux cents pièces à l'heure sur une presse [...]. Après dix ou douze ans les mécanographes par exemple sont obligées de s'arrêter et trouvent difficilement à se reclasser; dans d'autres fabrications, à 30 ans les femmes doivent être changées de poste car elles ne peuvent plus exécuter assez vite les tâches qui demandent à la fois une grande acuité visuelle et une grande sûreté de gestes. (Sartin, 1968: 135-136)

Interestingly, Kergoat points out that in one of the electronics factories she visited while carrying out her research, nearly all the female technicians were wearing glasses. However, their declining eyesight was not attributed to the strain involved in manipulating tiny objects:

Mais la baisse d'acuité visuelle n'est pas reconnue comme maladie professionnelle; pas plus que la baisse d'acuité auditive pour les standardistes, la scoliose pour les dactylos, les maladies de peau pour les femmes de service [...]. En fait, les

maladies des femmes (à la différence de celles des hommes) sont très rarement imputées au travail concret qu'elles ont à effectuer mais à leur constitution biologique et psychologique, bref à la nature féminine. (Kergoat, 1982: 149-150)

Here, Kergoat highlights a classic case of sexual prejudice. Gender difference is used as an excuse for the employers' flagrant neglect of female well-being in the workplace. Not surprisingly, there is no medical or sociological evidence to suggest that women are better qualified to do this sort of work. In fact, the majority of women recruited to work in factories are placed in posts where no specific expertise or previous experience are required. This is due to the fact that increased mechanisation and automation has reduced the need for skilled workers and has increased the demand for an unqualified workforce.<sup>12</sup> The gender myth that women have a 'natural' disposition for tedious work is endlessly peddled by employers in order to justify the placement of women in lower grade jobs. Is the real reason not that women are conditioned to passive endurance after years of domestic servitude? This attitude is clearly deplored by Letessier who expresses her cynicism through her heroine, Maryvonne: 'Quand on a besoin d'O.S., les femmes et les immigrés sont les plus qualifiés' (Letessier, 1980: 118). As Lainé's striking quotation illustrates, the reality of the situation is that employers are obliged to turn to women and immigrant workers<sup>13</sup> to fill these positions because the white male population is wisely reluctant to accept work with such low status and pay:

Toutes les fois qu'une innovation technique, ou qu'une transformation de la conjoncture économique ou sociale, détermine une dévalorisation et une déqualification importantes et durables d'un certain type de travail, on assiste à une immigration massive de main d'œuvre féminine dans ce secteur de la production.

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<sup>12</sup>See Kergoat, 1982: 14.

<sup>13</sup>It is deeply ironic that the policemen who subject Arezki to a humiliating strip-search in front of Elise (Etcherelli, 1967: 218-219) resent the fact that he is earning a living in France, but neglect to admit it is a living that would be acceptable to very few French men.

Ainsi le travail féminin moderne constitue la forme la plus typique, c'est-à-dire la plus brutale, de la prolétarianisation. (Lainé, 1974: 131)

This sympathetic male sociologist demonstrates that in Marxist terms, women are doubly alienated in the workplace.

Unfortunately for female employees, the concentration of women in certain sectors simply devalues the work further. It goes without saying that the employer benefits financially from the sexual segregation within the factory. In *Un métier, pour quoi faire?* Sullerot, Chabaud and Ullin point out that as far back as the nineteenth century women were taken on in factories to carry out unskilled work because employers could appreciate the cash advantages of employing a cheap and compliant workforce:

On les embauche volontiers, pour plusieurs raisons: parce qu'on sait qu'elles excellent dans les mouvements rapides, même s'ils sont monotones et répétés à cadences accélérées; parce que, très pauvres et sans défense, elles sont contraintes d'en passer par les volontés du patron et sont peu revendicatrices: on peut les payer moins cher que les hommes. (Sullerot, Chabaud and Ullin, 1969: 39)

The division of labour within the manufacturing industry is examined in more detail in *Les Ouvrières*. Kergoat argues that there is 'une manière homme et une manière femme d'être ouvrier' (Kergoat, 1982: 5). All factory workers, male and female, are compelled to work with the rhythm of the production line, yet Kergoat's research shows that women are subject to tighter controls: 'Une O. S. sur 6 seulement (contre 3 hommes sur 10) n'est soumise à aucun contrôle; les pauses sont plus rares mais le pointage beaucoup plus fréquent chez les ouvrières (40%) que chez les ouvriers (27%)' (Kergoat, 1982: 45). Moreover, women are more likely to be working in situations where talking to co-workers is forbidden. In the course of her research, Kergoat found that 11.6% of women were affected

by this rule compared with only 5.9% of men. The fictional descriptions bring these statistics to life. Letessier's Maryvonne has to suffer her manager's irritating habit of glancing at his watch whenever she says a word to her neighbour (Letessier, 1980: 67). She also shrewdly observes the dividing line between men's and women's jobs. Seated positions, for example, are classified as 'jobs for pregnant women': 'Si on met un homme dessus, il en est presque vexé' (Letessier, 1980: 107). Loïca too is supervised by a particularly unpleasant and intimidating foreman, Fourier, who, on one occasion, observes every move she makes for a whole hour (Letessier, 1983: 75). The workers on the assembly line are not treated like human beings, nor are they allowed to behave like human beings: every second must be accounted for and every action they perform is strictly monitored:

Chaque geste le plus minime soit-il est enregistré et noté au dixième de seconde, au bout d'une dizaine de fois, les moyennes sont additionnées et on obtient le temps total alloué pour l'opération entière. On ne compte pas le temps passé à relever une mèche de cheveux, à chercher un écrou normal quand on a pioché un écrou défectueux, à faire un pas en arrière ou en avant pour rattraper une pièce mal disposée sur le tapis roulant et encore moins le temps de lever la tête pour échanger deux mots avec le voisin ou d'appeler le chef en cas de pépin. (Letessier, 1983: 75-76)

The expectation by the management that workers can, like machines, perform the same sequence of movements at the same rate throughout their shift puts intense pressure on them. In *Le Voyage à Paimpol*, Maryvonne charts the progressive stiffening of limbs: 'Figés dans la position qui concilie le mieux la cadence et l'inconfort le plus supportable, nos muscles, nos nerfs se confondent avec la dureté de la matière et la vitesse des machines' (Letessier, 1980: 15). There are times when Maryvonne is unable to tell whether the machine is operated by her or whether she is operated by the machine. This concrete observation emphasises the extent of her exploitation. The denaturalisation and



dehumanisation of women is brought out strongly by Letessier's conversion of the female workers into appendages of the grinding machinery.

One of the most frustrating aspects of assembly line work is the lack of job satisfaction. Workers are not motivated to feel that they are an important link in the chain of production because they are generally ignorant of what happens elsewhere in the factory: 'Bien entendu, l'ouvrier ignore l'usage de chaque pièce, 1) la manière dont elle se combine avec les autres, 2) la succession des opérations accomplies sur elle, 3) l'usage ultime de l'ensemble' (Weil, 1951: 73). In *Elise ou la vraie vie*, Elise's induction is hastily delivered with no time for repeat explanations. Moreover, all communication is hampered because of the noise of the machinery. Nobody tells Elise what happens to the car before it reaches the final inspection stage. She hopes Gilles, the foreman, will enlighten her but he does not have the time because if he stops to talk then the whole production line is delayed (Etcherelli, 1967: 86-87): 'On ne comprend rien au travail que l'on fait. Si on voyait par où se passe une voiture, d'où elle vient, où elle va, on pourrait s'intéresser, prendre conscience du sens de ses efforts' (94). Likewise, Maryvonne is unaware of the significance of her individual input: 'Ces pièces qui vont je ne sais où, qui ne me sont rien que des blessures aux doigts, je les hais' (Letessier, 1980: 10). Lucien, with his cynical political awareness explains to Elise that she is but a pawn in the process. Her role in the factory is not to understand, but to execute a meaningless sequence of actions: 'Quand tu auras pris la cadence, tu deviendras une mécanique bien réglée qui ne verra pas plus loin que le bout de la chaîne. Tu seras classée bonne ouvrière et augmentée de trois francs de l'heure' (Etcherelli, 1967: 120).

In Letessier's novels, at least some camaraderie exists among the workers. However, Elise's experience in the factory, in common with that of Weil's, is one of isolation. For a period, there are no other women in the workshop and so Elise has little contact with the female workers. She sees them only in the cloakroom where they eat their lunch, the staff canteen being ostensibly out of bounds for women, because, as Lucien explains: 'Ça te

déplaira, et puis, il n'y a que des hommes' (Etcherelli, 1967, 93). Elise finds it difficult to relate to cloakroom conversations which revolve solely around men and make-up. Similarly, Letessier's heroines become slightly exasperated with the conversations of their workmates, who, when they are not listing their various ailments, discuss the pros and cons of fitted sheets: 'Moi, j'aime pas les draps-housses. C'est peut-être bien au lit, mais dans les armoires, ça fait pas joli. On n'arrive jamais à les plier comme il faut, même en les repassant' (Letessier, 1980: 83-84). Conjuring up attractive images and planning the interior decoration of their homes are the women's chief safety valves and indeed constitute their sole form of escapism. Again 'les belles images' serve as a means of temporarily shutting out the greyness and dinginess of life. In *Loïca* one of the women explains that because the factory is so filthy and miserable, the compulsion to prettify her home is all the greater:

«A cause de l'usine, je suis tout le temps débordée. Quand j'ai fini le ménage, la cuisine, le linge et tout le tremblement, j'ai même plus la force de regarder les variétés à la télé! [...] Et puis, je suis soigneuse, c'est vrai, un peu maniaque, peut-être. Quand même on a sa fierté, c'est si moche ici, il faut que ce soit beau chez soi, au moins.» (Letessier, 1983: 101)

The factory is so dehumanising that the workers feel the need to remind themselves that they are not machines but living, breathing, sexual beings. Elise's female colleagues re-touch lipstick and powder at every available opportunity despite the fact that their nails are ingrained with the grime of the machinery and their skin parched by the lack of fresh air in the factory:

Le rouge des ongles recouvrait le plus souvent de la crasse; leurs cheveux sales s'ornaient de velours; elles poudraient la sueur grise de leur peau. Je revois ma voisine dans ce vestiaire, une femme de trente-cinq ans, pas belle, ridée, obligée par le règlement à se vêtir d'un treillis de couteil décoloré. (Etcherelli, 1967: 135)

Le coin de l'œil était gâté par trop de rides. Ses cheveux frisaient autour des oreilles et démarquaient l'ocre de son maquillage. (Etcherelli, 1967: 150)

Their endeavours to attract, though touching, are rather futile. In *Loïca*, one of the female characters, Georgette, supplements her factory pay by selling beauty products to her colleagues (Letessier, 1983: 74), but the author's ironical subtext is plain. When would women who leave the factory only to start their unpaid 'deuxième journée' as Sullerot calls it<sup>14</sup>, have the chance to spend time in front of a mirror preening and indulging themselves? Etcherelli makes exactly the same point about the colleagues with family responsibilities who rush out of the factory gates at the end of the day: 'Les femmes se sauvaient, sans souci de leur visage. Un autre travail les attendait, pour lequel il n'était pas nécessaire de s'embellir' (Etcherelli, 1967: 155). Poole (1994: 42) suggests in her critical guide to *Elise ou la vraie vie*, that in painting their nails and faces the women are 'making a barely-conscious statement of defiance towards a job which in its monotony and dirtiness continuously militates against any desire to take pride in one's appearance — in one's self.' However, I feel that Poole endows them with a consciousness that they clearly lack: it is precisely the absence of defiance that confines them to their low-grade positions.

Unfortunately, the women's desire to feel attractive in order to entice the opposite sex also has the adverse effect of inducing a certain cattiness and competitiveness in their treatment of each other. Etcherelli's descriptions of Elise's co-workers are harsh and unflattering. The language they use is blunt and sometimes vulgar, as if they have been hardened by the work on the assembly line. The only way they can preserve their dignity and self-respect is by assuming a tough front and putting down fellow workers, or else by literally hiding behind a mask of make-up: 'Il y avait là quelque chose qui dépassait la coquetterie: une parade, une défense instinctive contre un travail qui finissait par vous

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<sup>14</sup>See Sullerot, 1973: 196.

clochardiser' (Etcherelli, 1967: 134-135). In *Le Voyage à Paimpol*, the new female recruit who arrives in the workshop fully made-up and immaculately dressed in a tight-fitting white outfit and a satin turban is immediately perceived as a threat by the other women: 'Les femmes [...] s'empresment de médire de la «grue». [...] «Elle est folle, cette fille, c'est pas une tenue d'ouvrière qu'elle porte là»' (Letessier, 1980: 138).

All of our authors highlight the effects of factory work on the workers' health but Letessier and Etcherelli illustrate how the assembly line seems to sap the women's youth, strength and beauty: 'Neuf heures d'usine détruisaient le plus harmonieux des visages' (Etcherelli, 1967: 155). The harsh truth is that the factory environment blights the women's beauty and accelerates the cruel process of ageing. Ironically, the women's vitality is rekindled when it is time to leave the factory. Suddenly there is the bustle of 'la joie fugace' (Etcherelli, 1967: 131). Their reaction at the end of the working day reminds Elise of schoolchildren on the last day of term (196). All three of the texts make it clear that low-grade work neither confers status nor spells liberation. Thévenon's point that 'l'état de prolétaire est un état de fait et non de choix' is borne out: women work in these conditions because they have no other choice. They still suffer discrimination, whether this is being whistled at by male workers, being unofficially excluded from the canteen or being chastised for talking or not working fast enough. The only respite from *métro-boulot-dodo* they can look forward to is retirement. For one of Elise's workmates this will be the start of the 'vraie vie':

— Vivement la retraite... soupira ma voisine en boutonnant son manteau.

Je protestai.

— Quoi, dit-elle, ça ne sera pas le commencement de la belle vie?

— Ce sera la fin de votre vie.

— Et alors? Et maintenant, c'est quoi, pour moi, la vie? Cavaler, regarder l'heure, travailler. J'aurai le temps, je me laisserai vivre. (Etcherelli, 1967: 155)

For Elise, however, it is different since the experience in the factory, which has opened her eyes to the real world, has at least made possible her short-lived and rapturous love affair with Arezki. This does not alter the unpalatable fact that the women in the texts selected in this chapter are triply oppressed. There is minimal political solidarity between them, they are less able to withstand the physical toll exacted by the nature of the work and they are the targets of professional victimisation and sexual harassment.

## **WOMEN AND TRADE UNIONS**

The preceding sections have traced a depressingly negative picture of women's subordination in the workplace. Etcherelli's heroines in particular are marked by their defeatism. However, both of Letessier's female protagonists are active members of the trade unions. Again the sociologist Kergoat highlights the obstacles which preclude women from participating fully in militant activities. The main obstacle is, of course, the 'double journée': women's second full-time job at home makes it impossible for them to find the time required for union business:

Il n'y a pas manqué d'intérêt pour le fait syndical, mais difficultés objectives d'insertion dans l'institution telle qu'elle fonctionne. [...] Quand on a besoin de toute sa volonté pour mener de front travail salarié et travail domestique, organiser sa vie et son temps mais aussi celle et celui de toute une famille, il n'est guère étonnant que cela ne pousse guère à être revendicative de façon organisée et continue.

(Kergoat, 1982: 130)

Employers, as we have seen, are all too well aware that the female workforce is more compliant than the male, and they take advantage of this when establishing women's

pay and conditions of work. Nonetheless, Letessier's second novel, *Loïca*, illustrates the positive and the negative aspects of trade union membership for women. Her heroine tries to impress upon her colleagues the benefits of representation and the importance of joining the union. From her anarchist grandfather, whose motto was 'Ne jamais se soumettre' (Letessier, 1983: 32), Loïca inherits a strong class consciousness as well as a courageous and determined outlook. This makes her an inspirational role model for her more timid co-workers:

Pour Marie-Line, Loïca trouve les phrases qui donnent du courage et aident à comprendre. Elle dit comment arriver en retard et résister à l'envie de rentrer carrément chez soi plutôt que d'affronter le regard et les plaisanteries du chef et des autres, comment refuser les heures supplémentaires si on n'a pas besoin d'en faire. (Letessier, 1983: 60)

However, although she is popular with her colleagues, Loïca's assertiveness is perceived as aggression by the management. Here we observe a classic instance of double standards in action. Fourier, the foreman, is a self-important bully who expects Loïca to cower when he criticises her. When she refuses he threatens to take her to the personnel department. This provocation is the last straw for Loïca and she slaps him. In recounting this incident to the journalist, Loïca's friend on the assembly line, Étienne, expresses his admiration: 'Tu te rends compte! Personne d'autre n'aurait osé le gifler, et pourtant il y en a beaucoup qui en auraient eu envie...' (Letessier, 1983: 83-84). Letessier's point that women employees are treated more severely for having militant tendencies is borne out by Kergoat's research: 'Les syndicalistes sont unanimes: une même remarque venant d'un ouvrier sera bien acceptée par la maîtrise, pas du tout tolérée si elle vient d'une femme' (Kergoat, 1982: 45).

The delegate for Loïca's section, Maryvonne, recognises that Loïca could contribute a great deal if she became a union delegate. Maryvonne admires Loïca's articulate and persuasive discourse and her ability to verbalise the workers' oppression: 'Elle avait des idées sur la justice, sur l'inacceptable, et osait le dire. Une déléguée comme Loïca relèverait le niveau! Maryvonne avec Loïca retrouvait le goût de monter au feu' (Letessier, 1983: 91-92). Maryvonne's contribution to the jigsaw puzzle the journalist is piecing together is particularly interesting in the light it sheds on the role female delegates play within the union. The tasks Maryvonne is allocated are secretarial in nature: typing, taking dictation and recopying minutes (84). This exposes a fatal contradiction at the heart of the union: although it exists to stamp out discrimination or unfair treatment in the workplace, there is scant hope of reform when a hierarchical sexual division of responsibilities operates within the organisation itself. Injustices in the union are highlighted again when the journalist imagines the aftermath of the Fourier incident. The head delegate, Paul, promises to tell Fourier that workers should not be judged on their personality, their opinions or their private lives (88). However, when it comes to the question of Loïca becoming a delegate this noble ideal is forgotten. It is a sad truism that women's personal lives are always subjected to much harsher critical scrutiny than those of men.

Maryvonne is aware that the interests of female workers are subsumed within the interests of the male workers.<sup>15</sup> She makes the perfectly valid point that this is one of the reasons why women are reluctant to come forward for delegate positions: 'Cela pose trop de problèmes pour les femmes, et puis il faut avoir les nerfs solides, tu sais, les hommes, même au syndicat, ils ne sont pas toujours très compréhensifs...' (92). Her qualification 'même au syndicat' seems to be a particularly ironic understatement given Paul's *mauvaise foi*.

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<sup>15</sup>However, Letessier demonstrates that even the male workers are not particularly well-represented in the factory. Étienne feels intimidated by the language and experience of those elected to represent him and he prefers not to speak his mind or voice doubts over certain decisions (Letessier, 1983: 92-93).

Letessier deliberately foregrounds the drama of the strike in the novel in order to bring certain issues to a head: those of harassment and victimisation as well as pay and conditions. Fourier blames Loïca for the strike, refusing to see the objective reasons behind the workers' walkout, and sets out to punish her. He violently drives a fork-lift truck straight at her: 'Il éventre les caisses, les sacs de ciment, renverse tables et échelles et retrouve sa cible: Loïca. [...] Loïca tremble, les autres aussi: il veut l'aplatir, la briser' (108). His frustration is underlined by the sexually suggestive 'éventrer'. Only her nimbleness saves her life. She manages to defy him sexually and professionally. Precariously balanced on top of a stack of pallets, Loïca is able to stop him in his tracks by throwing a sack of cement powder at the truck.

Despite Fourier's murderous intentions, Loïca is the one removed from the section once everyone has returned to work, not Fourier. This is a flagrant injustice. She is once again let down by the union: her hard work during the strike goes unrewarded while Balland, the delegate who took sick leave and claimed full pay during the strike, is exculpated. Disaffected and isolated from her friends, Loïca nonetheless continues to protest against conditions in the factory. She encourages the women to make a list of all the injustices they suffer at work and home: 'Elle voulait qu'il y ait dans le couloir, sur le panneau d'affichage, une sorte de catalogue de tout ce que les femmes souffraient à l'usine et aussi chez elles comme brimades et humiliations' (167). Although this documentation of harassment is intended as an awareness raising exercise, it provokes outrage. Balland contends that it shows disunity within the union, yet it is evident that the women's actions have perturbed him, which would seem to imply a tacit recognition of guilt. By putting up their poster and drawing attention to their sufferings in this way, the women are indirectly attacking the union itself, reminding Paul and Balland that they are not adequately defending the rights of all union members. Marie-Line voices the women's shared conviction — that issues which are important to them are overlooked by the union: 'Avec toi comme déléguée, Loïca, on se sentira toutes mieux défendues' (168). Representation, as Halimi always argues powerfully,



needs to be equally balanced between the sexes in order that political reforms can be properly implemented.

Inevitably, when the time comes to put forward the names of the new delegates, Loïca's name is absent from the list. The male union officials close ranks: 'Ce ne sont tout de même pas des titres de gloire, mère célibataire, divorcée, révoltée contre tout. On ne peut pas courir le risque de la présenter. [...] Qu'elle soit plus disciplinée et la prochaine fois, on pourra envisager...' (172). The tensions exhibited at the union meeting show that the men have no desire to place discrimination against women on their agenda. Letessier's novel exposes the ironic fact that unions frequently work against the interests of women members. For the feminist reader, Loïca's ferocity represents a sterling challenge to patriarchal systems in both the private and the professional domain and it is this independence that finally leads them to exclude her.

## SHOP AND OFFICE WORK

In the more confined atmosphere of the shop and the office, which should offer the potential for greater fairness and more favourable working conditions, only a slightly more optimistic pattern is discernible. The work carried out by Etcherelli's heroines in *A propos de Clémence* and *Un arbre voyageur* is unstable, uncongenial and unrewarding. Lainé foregrounds the strenuous nature of shop work in *La Femme et ses images*. Part of his study on female employment involved a series of interviews with various French working women. One twenty-nine year old from La Rochelle described a job she had in one shop:

«C'était un magasin style Prisunic. [...] Le soir, j'étais fatiguée, je me demandais un peu pourquoi, et en voyant le poids des petits cartons j'avais calculé, en comptant

les piles, après, que j'avais déplacé deux tonnes de matériel dans la journée. Et ça, ce sont les femmes qui le font». (Lainé, 1974: 136)

In Etcherelli's *A propos de Clémence*, however, the backbreaking work Clémence undertakes in the mini-market Novaprix is definitely not confined to shifting small boxes. Numerous large cartons and crates of milk have to be heaved into the shop: 'Depuis la caisse Olga dirige: «Rentre ça, vide ça, sors, pousse, pose, nettoie, ramasse, fais vite les gens arrivent, dégage ici, garnis là, pèse encore, traîne les cageots dehors, ramène ça dedans, lave-moi un peu la vitrine»' (Etcherelli, 1971: 21). Just like the female workers in the factory, Clémence and her colleagues become 'résignées, silencieuses' (24). The protagonists' acquiescence in cold and harsh conditions is typically feminine, not feminist. The only way in which they retaliate against their oppression is when they lie in order to obtain a day off: 'Tandis qu'Olga vérifiait sa caisse, Pilar demanda qui demain serait malade' (32). Yet they are well aware that if they are discovered they will face the sack. Clémence loses her job at Novaprix when Olga discovers that she feigned illness in order to spend three days with Villaderda.

In the same way that factory life is shown to lead to a decline in the workers' physical and mental health in the other texts we have discussed, Novaprix seems to drain its employees of their youth: 'Trois ombres, ternes, fades, grises, informes, figées dans leur jeunesse maigre et sans éclat' (Etcherelli, 1971: 21). Their every movement is supervised by Olga, their employer, who then reproaches them for looking miserable at the end of the day. The Novaprix episodes highlight several of the frequently unrecognised problems that women face in their daily work. For example, women who work in the tertiary sector are expected to flaunt their sexuality and provide a certain sexual frisson, although this is not expected of male employees. Olga insists that Clémence, Anna and Pilar look attractive and well-presented, underlining the fact that they are principally employed to be 'belles images' and not 'êtres pensants': 'Olga disait souvent: «Une indéfrisable vous ferait la figure plus

gaie. Raides comme ça, mes petites!»' (Etcherelli, 1971: 28). This point is also stressed in Lainé's *La Femme et ses images*:

Car il faut noter qu'on demande à la femme, surtout dans les bureaux et dans les magasins, non seulement son travail mais une certaine présence sexuelle. Les petites annonces, par exemple, réclament beaucoup plus de jeunes filles que de femmes mûres. (Lainé, 1974: 154)

The culminating insult for Clémence is Villaderda's insinuation that she will always be able to acquire employment by touting her sexual attractiveness: 'Toi, enviait-il, jeune et désirable, quoi qu'il t'arrive tu trouverais toujours un lit où dormir, quelqu'un qui se chargerait de toi' (Etcherelli, 1971: 50). He conveniently overlooks the fact that ageism affects the female worker more than the male.

Etcherelli's second novel ends on a bleak note by drawing attention to the contradictory behaviour of a country that once welcomed Spanish political exiles with open arms only to chase them away at the first sign of trouble. Her protagonist, Clémence, emerges as too much of a passive accomplice in her own degradation and appears to lack the courage to verbalise her strengths. As for Gabrielle, her creator, the tone is slightly more positive. With her suitcase in her hand she is about to start a new life, rejecting Clémence's submissiveness. Just before she reaches the café where she is to be newly employed she sees the factory, and, opposite it, the hospice. With a cynicism obviously inherited from Villaderda she is wryly amused by their proximity:

On se présentait à la grille comme les femmes tout à l'heure et quand on sortait, on était bon pour aller finir en face. L'hospice et l'usine, deux piliers symétriques, et de l'un à l'autre, le trajet restait vraiment très court. (Etcherelli, 1971: 187)

Again black humour reinforces the bleakness of women's working conditions.

Gender difference is further compounded by unplanned pregnancy and single motherhood. Compared to Elise and Clémence, Milie, the central character of *Un arbre voyageur*, confronts the greatest hardships of all because she is a single working mother, just like her own mother was before her.<sup>16</sup> She is unmarried and has three children — Véra, Marc and Paul — to two different fathers. When the reader first meets her she is working as a telex and switchboard operator in a travel agency along with Anna but has been threatened with the sack because of her frequent absenteeism. Her unsympathetic employers feel there is no excuse for days off and that she should be grateful for such a comfortable post: 'Un poste recherché: finir la journée à cinq heures, privilège du télex, le rêve de toutes les femmes' (Etcherelli, 1978: 11). In fact this 'dream job' requires 'une grande rapidité, la synchronisation des réflexes' (204). When Milie returns to work she is relegated to the franking and photocopying machines in the basement where there is no ventilation. So much for the Xerox machine 'grâce à qui vos secrétaires ne passeront plus des heures dans les couloirs' (19). The expectation of her bosses is that she will soon weary and look for another job. Here we witness the familiar cycle of female employees who suffer victimisation because their superiors are not prepared to make proper allowances for women with children. Her employers are able to take advantage of Milie because she desperately needs the work. Not only is she victimised for taking sick leave, but the supervisor criticises her morals because she has three children and no husband: 'J'ai les idées larges! Un enfant, ça peut arriver. Trois! Non' (21). Here, we are reminded of Letessier's Loïca, who is unfairly reproached by union delegates because of her marital status. After Milie's fifth absence she loses her job: moving down rather than up the career ladder has become a normal pattern for Milie. Her friend, Anna, begins to realise just how difficult it is when she becomes pregnant herself. As soon as her employers find out that she has a child she is demoted too. Although she has never yet taken a day off, Anna's employers quite unjustly compensate in advance for the time they feel she will take off: '«Vos futures absences, expliquait-il,

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<sup>16</sup>Etcherelli was also a single working mother.

passeront mieux au sous-sol qu'à la fabrication. — Mes futures absences? — Inévitables, avec un enfant!»' (Etcherelli, 1978: 40-41).

Etcherelli has pinpointed here a classic case of discrimination and one that women frequently come up against in the workplace. Sullerot studies in detail the prejudice towards female workers in *Les Françaises au travail*:

La main-d'œuvre féminine s'absente beaucoup. C'est là sa réputation, et, il faut le dire, cette réputation nuit à l'ensemble des femmes [...]. En cela, parce que la travailleuse est presque inéluctablement rattachée à son groupe d'appartenance et affectée d'un coefficient d'absentéisme potentiel, on peut presque parler d'une attitude qui s'apparente au racisme: l'appartenance au groupe est un préjugé, au sens strict du mot, un jugement porté à l'avance, un handicap. (Sullerot, 1973: 154)

It is noteworthy that Sullerot detects a sort of racism against women. Her remarks are particularly relevant in the light of *Elise ou la vraie vie* where the most unrewarding and ill-remunerated jobs in the factory are given to foreigners and to the other underclass — women. In this sense the two groups are paralleled and Etcherelli's novel confirms the sociological fact that racism carries gender as well as colour implications.

Remarkably, employers compound their felony by expecting women to be grateful when they are offered menial tasks. As illustrated in Letessier's *Loïca*, temporary jobs like the one Loïca finds putting stickers on backs of cheques are only acceptable when they are approached in a light-hearted way: 'Heureusement qu'on rigole, parce que scotcheuse-vérifieuse, c'est pas un métier!' (Letessier, 1983: 146).

In reality, the woman who conducts a logical analysis of her working conditions and career expectations may well be forced to conclude that the only refuge is in dreams. Our

authors' analyses show that only romantic fiction can sustain romantic illusions. The implications drawn from perusing Etcherelli's trilogy are starkly pessimistic. It is interesting in this context that the interviews carried out by Madeleine Guilbert for her book *Les Fonctions des femmes dans l'industrie*<sup>17</sup> reveal that some women are content to do simple, mindless jobs because it allows them to concentrate on the short-term: what they have to do in the house and what they are going to cook for dinner. All this seems to prove, however, is what has been repeatedly stressed by feminist writers and sociologists — that working mothers are never able to 'clock off'. Milie is made only too aware of this when she returns home one evening after being with Walter to her daughter Véra's indignation (Etcherelli, 1978: 244). The children find it difficult to accept that Milie has an identity other than that of 'mother' and, like tyrannical employers, they demand reasons for her absence.

As a single working mother, Milie has experienced the alienation of capitalist society. Consequently, the events of May '68 carry a great importance for her. She knows what it is like to feel powerless and totally dependent on the whims of irascible employers, so now she wants to embrace the movement that seeks to change existing political, social and cultural patterns. Her decision to leave Walter marks her rejection of a life that involves going from one poorly paid job to another — 'Vies passées dans les galeries souterraines du travail, sans jamais recevoir cet air frais qu'apportaient la parole et le mouvement des autres' (366). 'La parole et le mouvement' of the wider political horizons of May '68 liberate her as work did not.

For most of her life Milie has been 'un arbre voyageur', putting down roots wherever she can in an attempt to provide shelter for her family. Although, like all of Etcherelli's heroines, she shows weakness where her sentimental life is concerned, she copes better with the strains of everyday life than the men of *Un arbre voyageur*. In an interview in *Le Matin*, Etcherelli explains to Anne Manceron why these distinctions are valid:

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<sup>17</sup>Extracts from Guilbert taken from Sartin, 1968.

Effectivement, les personnages des femmes sont beaucoup plus riches que ceux des hommes. Dans la vie, c'est souvent ainsi. Les femmes savent mieux tirer parti de leurs dons, de leur énergie; ce sont les hommes qui gâchent leurs talents reçus. A situation égale, les femmes savent faire fructifier le peu qu'elles ont reçu, et elles ont une ouverture d'esprit plus grande. (Manceron, 1978: 27)

The fidelity of Etcherelli's evocation of French working-class women in her three novels is borne out by contemporary statistics. In the 1960s the majority of women worked either as employees in shops and offices or else in industry<sup>18</sup>, yet, as highlighted earlier, the working woman most often represented in the female press, for example, is a middle-class woman, a woman with a career. Etcherelli's heroines work on the assembly line or in the supermarket; they are typists and clerks; they operate franking machines; they answer telephones.

Through her female characters, Elise, Clémence and Milie, Etcherelli foregrounds the seemingly insuperable problems encountered by women on a daily basis in their place of work. Gender bias is shown to be compounded by capitalist discrimination. The women must endure sexism from other workers and discrimination by employers; they are penalised in advance with low-pay and they are given little or no training because they are liable to become pregnant. This gynaecological handicap cripples their chances of equal or just treatment. As a result of being denied training they remain unskilled, and in the hierarchical structures of the factory or the office they have little chance of progressing beyond the lower echelons.

Etcherelli, Letessier and Weil have drawn attention to the prosaic difficulties of a section of society much under-represented both in fiction and in non-fiction. These authors

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<sup>18</sup>See Duchon, 1994: 134.

are exceptional in the sense that very few women writers or novelists have had the personal experience to give such an insight into working-class life and the particular problems faced by women. The working women, real and fictional, whose lives are described in their texts, disprove Beauvoir's assertion that work emancipates women. These women have no option but to take the first job they can find, a point Etcherelli stresses in an interview in *Elle*: 'La libération de la femme, c'est le choix. Nous avons déjà le choix dans la vie sexuelle et la maternité. Reste à gagner le choix dans le travail. Alors, enfin, nous aurons le choix de choisir' (Tournier, 1978: 57-59).



## **5. PROFESSIONAL WOMEN AND MATERNAL GUILT**

We have investigated representations of working-class women in literature which have focused on their status within the workplace, the repetitive nature of the work they are assigned, and the particular difficulties they encounter at work and at home. Here we shall take another two novels by an emblematic modern French writer in order to examine some of the pressures faced by women whose professional careers or creative fulfilment conflict with their maternal and familial duties. We are limiting ourselves to the two of Cardinal's novels, *Le Passé empiété* and *Les Grands Désordres*, which make maternal guilt their central theme. The female heroines — 'la brodeuse' and Elsa Labbé — represent a break with the past. They are financially independent women who have not only realised their career ambitions but have excelled in their respective fields. However, both women feel guilty for having neglected their maternal responsibilities: they are convinced that fulfilment of their own desires has impacted negatively on their children's lives.

The professional woman experiences the stresses and strains of the *double journée* differently from the OS in the factory. It is not enough for her to achieve success in her career, she must be equally proficient in her role as wife and mother. As well as providing financially for her children, she still shoulders the main responsibility for their daily diet, their education, their moral and physical hygiene and their emotional welfare. Educated, middle-class women who work outside the home are the sector of society targeted most by publications on parenting. They are also the sector of society most sensitive to the myths promulgated by these manuals ('Nous suivons à la lettre Dolto et Brazelton'<sup>1</sup>) because the

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<sup>1</sup>Françoise Dolto (1908-1988) was a psychoanalyst who specialised in the education of children. She advised parents that regular dialogue with their children was imperative. Dr Terry Berry Brazelton is a

idealised, Catholic, mythical image of the mother they feel they should have been is engraved on their minds. As I highlighted in the chapter on housework, the problems of the full-time mother in France are compounded by the priority accorded to food in a country where gastronomy is such a revered part of the national culture. In infant bibles guilt is used as a lever to encourage French mothers to prepare epicurean feasts for undiscerning baby palates. As Fitoussi sardonically points out in *Le Ras-le-bol des superwomen*, mothers of children who are not provided with a meticulously planned diet must admit full responsibility if that child later develops an eating disorder:

Ces bouquins de cuisine très stylés aux titres alléchants (*Mon tout-petit sera un fin gourmet*) trônent dans toutes les bonnes cuisines. Et nous expliquent en long et en large que nous ne savons pas nourrir nos enfants qui, par notre faute, risquent à trois ans l'obésité, à cinq l'infarctus et, beaucoup plus grave, le goût gâté à jamais. (Fitoussi, 1987: 112-113)

The message reinforced by advertisers, parenting manuals, the medical world and by society in general is that it is primarily the mother's function to protect the child and to ensure he or she grows up in good health. As we shall see in the two novels by Cardinal, as soon as the child's security is threatened, it is the mothers who abandon their careers and personal interests. Where 'la brodeuse' and Elsa Labbé are concerned, neglect of their professional responsibility entails considerable sacrifice, yet they readily modify their work routines in order to commit themselves fully to their children.

When Sullerot carried out a survey of French working women she found that the more educated a woman is, the lower her absence rate and the less likely she is to interrupt her career (Sullerot, 1973: 85). The explanation for this is that professional women with well-paid jobs demonstrate a greater commitment to their work than women in unskilled positions.

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renowned American paediatrician. The quotation is from *Le Ras-le-bol des superwomen* (Fitoussi, 1987: 75).

However, the greater her professional dedication, the more acutely the woman experiences the discord between work and family life. Although she may find her work extremely fulfilling, the professional woman often feels guilty about leaving her child with a childminder. In the course of her research, Sullerot was sobered to find that when the women she surveyed were questioned about their childcare arrangements and asked whether their children objected to them going to work, many declined to respond:

Leur malaise à l'endroit de leurs enfants s'est nettement dévoilé quand nous leur avons demandé de dire ce que leurs enfants pensaient du fait que leur mère travaille. La culpabilité est encore très forte parmi les mères qui travaillent, ou, si ce n'est la culpabilité, tout bonnement la tristesse d'avoir à laisser ses enfants chaque jour. (Sullerot, 1973: 268)

Sullerot's research reinforces what other labour market and sociological studies have found: that women's personal and career projects are gradually occupying a more central position in their lives, with the result that they are less inclined to take career breaks to bring up their children. Crucially, however, although women have shifted towards this more 'masculine' pattern of work, there has been no corresponding behavioural shift by working men. Fitoussi (1987: 20) has little confidence in the situation improving for women: 'Tant que nos hommes n'y mettront pas (beaucoup) plus du leur, tant que nous voudrions tout courir à la fois, nous les SuperWomen, nous aurons encore de beaux jours (à râler) devant nous.' Men have not compromised by spending more time at home with their children or by significantly increasing the number of hours they spend on domestic chores. Whereas reciprocity of duties would benefit both partners and their children, the failure to share responsibilities means that women are unable to disentangle themselves from the shackles of domesticity and are coerced into leading a double life. Practically and emotionally, therefore, women are inexorably sucked into the 'enlissement' so well described by Ernaux in *La Femme gelée*. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that educated women with careers

set themselves more exacting standards both at work and in the home. This point is backed up by journalists Ariane Artinian and Laurence Boccara, who confirm that professional women have the longest working day: 'C'est pour les femmes exerçant une profession libérale que la charge de travail globale est la plus lourde: 10 heures 49 [par jour] si l'on additionne travail domestique et travail professionnel' (Artinian and Boccara, 1992: 69).

Cardinal focuses sharply on the dilemmas facing working mothers in *Le Passé empiété* and *Les Grands Désordres*. Although the pluralism within the narrative framework of both novels is innovative, certain themes recur. These are conveniently summarised in Cairns' penetrating study, *Marie Cardinal : Motherhood and Creativity*: fulfilment in creativity; feelings of guilt about self-absorption and independence from family; single or largely single parenthood; the absent or dead father; the pressures on women to conform to conflicting norms of feminine and maternal behaviour, and the word *ça*, which is a reference to the author's subconscious impulses.<sup>2</sup> Cardinal's texts are also linked by the enduring pregnancy/birth metaphor for artistic creativity, encountered earlier in *Autrement dit*:

Les mots, les virgules, les accents, les espaces blancs, se sont collés les uns aux autres comme des berlingots dans un bocal humide et commencent à former un bloc indépendant de moi, extérieur à moi, qui a une existence différente de la mienne.  
[...] Ça ressemble beaucoup à un enfant.

Il y a quelque chose de poignant, de palpitant, de grave dans la délivrance d'un livre comme dans la délivrance d'un enfant. (Cardinal, 1977: 68)

This analogy between creative work and parturition provides the key to the heroines' malaise. It explains why 'la brodeuse' and Elsa Labbé perceive work and family as essentially incompatible. Both work and family arouse in them the same sense of joy and

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<sup>2</sup>Cairns provides details of Cardinal's recurrent motifs in her introductions to chapters six and seven. See Cairns, 1992: 178, 218.

fulfilment; both demand their undivided attention; both, unfortunately, are the root cause of the narrators' feelings of guilt.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND WRITING FROM THE BODY

Cardinal's popularity and success as a writer and the reason why, since the publication of her novels, she has been inundated by letters from women all over France — 'Des lettres de femmes... Il y en a une masse dans ma tête. Il y a des liasses sur ma table de travail. Il y en a tous les jours dans mon courrier' (Cardinal, 1980: 5) — is due not only to the fact that her accounts are living testimony or *cas vécus*, but also due to her mastery of multiple stylistic registers. Cardinal draws from her own experience of working motherhood so when she writes about marriage, childbirth and raising a family, it is not from the detached, theoretical standpoint assumed by Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, but with the hindsight of a woman who has experienced not just marriage but marriage break-up, not only childbirth but single parenting. In *Autrement dit* she declares, having just published her sixth novel, *Les Mots pour le dire*, that she has been all six of her female protagonists and that by the time she has written twenty books she will have written twenty autobiographies (Cardinal, 1977: 85).

Certainly in *Le Passé empiété* it becomes clear during the 'Deuxième Partie', when the narrator assumes her father's identity and tells her version of his childhood, engineering apprenticeship, marriage and tuberculous condition, that characters and events are based on Cardinal's own life and family history. And although Elsa Labbé, protagonist of *Les Grands Désordres* is not another recognisable offshoot of the Marie Cardinal character, the main subject matter of the novel, drug addiction, is something Cardinal directly experienced as her youngest daughter, Bénédicte, was a heroin addict. Cardinal began writing at a stage in her life when her husband was in Canada and she was alone in France bringing up her three

small children, so it is an inevitable result of this personal experience that the themes we discussed earlier such as maternal guilt and the conflict and apparent disparity between maternal and creative roles occur frequently in her work.

## COURTROOM DRAMA AND MYTH

The female heroines of *Le Passé empiété* and *Les Grands Désordres* both transgress in identical fashion: they have deviated from their pre-ordained roles as mothers and wives. Of the charges brought against them, the first is that they have failed their children and the second is that they have dispensed with men by being financially independent and physically and emotionally self-sufficient. At the start of both novels the two defendants are each pleading 'coupable'. In fact, they themselves have instituted the court proceedings, but as they rewind and re-examine their pasts during a kind of self-imposed psychotherapy, they both begin to understand that maternal guilt is essentially caused by western society's rigorous and antiquated code of conduct for mothers.

Like the narrator of *Les Mots pour le dire*, the narrator of *Le Passé empiété* creates an alter ego to help her deal with her emotional turmoil. The former struggles to co-exist with 'la chose'/'la folle' — her subconscious creation; 'la brodeuse', on the other hand, resurrects Clytemnestra, a famous queen of Greek mythology who murdered her husband, king Agamemnon of Mycenae. French twentieth century literature has typically employed ancient myth to foreground modern existential dilemmas. Here the myth complicates the inherent maternal proneness to masochism. 'La brodeuse' identifies with the queen because, like Clytemnestra, she has unintentionally 'killed off' her husband by becoming too involved in her embroidery, thus neglecting him and causing him to leave:

La première authentique «aventure» de Jacques, je l'ai attribué à mon âge. [...] Je n'ai pas souffert longtemps de son amourette. Je n'ai pas compris que mes broderies prenaient sa place les nuits où il découchait. Je n'ai pas compris que je l'offensais en souffrant si peu. (Cardinal, 1983: 38)

Clytemnestra is murdered by her children as a result of her crime against their father. 'La brodeuse' accordingly interprets the involvement of her two children in a near-fatal road accident as punishment for her crime. Her irrational feelings of guilt and the total incongruity between the crime committed and the punishment she feels she deserves are reminiscent of the passage in *Le Voyage à Paimpol* in which Letessier's heroine, Maryvonne, picks up a newspaper in the hairdressers and envisages a scandalous story about her clandestine flight from the family home: 'ELLE COURT TOUJOURS! L'HORRIBLE CRIME DE MARYVONNE T.' (Letessier, 1980: 98). Cardinal's narrator in *Le Passé empiété* feels that in seeking an autonomous identity she has violated the unspoken and sacrosanct rules about women's pre-ordained role within the family, and that she must atone for this crime with the death of her children:

Coupable de m'être passée de Jacques, d'en avoir privé mes enfants! C'est de ça que je suis coupable, pas d'avoir acheté une moto, pas d'avoir brodé! Non, coupable de n'avoir pas besoin de la protection des hommes. Je ne suis pas restée à ma place, je suis sortie de mon rang, j'ai créé le désastre. (Cardinal, 1983: 44)

On a more abstract level 'la brodeuse', like Clytemnestra, is also murdered by her children. When she starts to achieve renown because of her embroidery, they are perturbed by the discovery that the woman they have known solely as 'maman' has another identity, previously concealed from them, and so they attempt to quash this deviant side. They refuse to accept their mother's creative personality and by undermining her success — 'Mes enfants eux-mêmes, entraînés par l'ironie complaisante de leur père, n'aimaient guère la

renommée qui m'entourait et ils dépensaient l'argent que je gagnais comme si cet argent n'avait pas été le fruit de mon ouvrage mais plutôt un gain de loterie' (40) — they are stifling what she feels is her very essence.

Or moi j'ai su,[...] que «ça» avait toujours été en moi. «Ça» existait avant que j'aie des enfants, avant que je connaisse un homme, avant que je sois nubile. «Ça», ce que j'exprimais là, germait en moi depuis le commencement de mon existence.

(Cardinal, 1983: 41)

It is worth emphasising that the word “ça” in *Le Passé empiété* carries different implications to the word “ça” in *Les Mots pour le dire*. There is a marked progress from the earlier “ça” which stood for her subversive and incontrollable impulses to the later “ça” which represents her creative/artistic drive. The symbolic murder or sentence to death of the artistic part of her takes place after the road accident:

J'ai vu mes enfants ensanglantés, à l'agonie. J'ai vu aussi ma vie ravagée, au moment où elle était justement la plus belle. [...] La peur a jailli, tellement absurde que j'étais incapable de la broder. J'ai cessé de broder, je n'ai plus eu le goût de le faire. (Cardinal, 1983: 43)

The deeply spiritual, profoundly visceral mother-child bond<sup>3</sup> is seen to intensify guilt feelings. When Cardinal visualises her children's death, she experiences the agony of losing them as if she were aborting them from the womb. Both Clytemnestra and 'la brodeuse' feel as if they have lost part of themselves after their children's lives are taken/threatened. They persist in self-flagellation and relive the fatal moments with flashbacks.

<sup>3</sup>A recent article in *L'Express* suggests that the intensity of the mother-daughter bond increases when fathers are either absent or spend long periods away from home: “On observe une proximité quasi passionnelle entre les mères et les filles, affirme Monique Guirand, pédopsychiatre à Lyon. Car les pères sont souvent absents ou écartés, et les mères organisent leur vie autour de l'enfant. C'est le couple homme-femme qui est devenu précaire. Le couple mère-fille, lui, reste indestructible.” (Rémy, 1997: 54)



Au début j'ai eu mal à chasser la moto de ma tête. [...] La mort de mes enfants, leur chair éclatée, leurs yeux vitreux. Insupportable! Mes viscères, mes tripes, mes entrailles se crampaient. Mon ventre se trouait, se vidait, aspiré par la peur et la révolte: «Non, pas ça, pas la mort de mes enfants!» (Cardinal, 1983: 18)

In contrast, the fathers remain relatively unperturbed. Agamemnon coolly made the choice to sacrifice his daughter in the first place, while the protagonist's husband, Jacques, although initially anguished by the accident, is not prevented from carrying on with everyday life. Unlike his wife, he feels no sense of responsibility and starts to space out his hospital visits, content to leave everything in fate's hands: 'A quoi ça sert d'être là, ils ne nous voient même pas. Il faut s'en remettre à la Providence et surtout à leur santé, à leur capacité de résistance, c'est tout ce qu'on peut faire' (Cardinal, 1983: 20). Male logic prevails over feminine empathy.

In resurrecting Clytemnestra and in merging with her father, the narrator is expressing a desire to see her own familial drama played out on the stage. In transcending her own reality and moving into the worlds of Clytemnestra and Jean-Maurice, she is able to study more objectively patriarchal society and its endeavours to confine women within socially-acceptable gender boundaries. In particular, her identification with Clytemnestra enables her to explore both the emotional bond between her and her children and her feelings regarding motherhood in general.

In my chapter on education, I discussed Rich's examination of the intense identification between a mother and her daughter. Rich (1977: 243-245) highlights the importance of nurturing daughters but acknowledges that this is only possible when the mother has both self-respect and a strong sense of self-nurture. Although Rich recognises how difficult it is for women to abandon their self-sacrificial roles, especially when so much of

a mother's potentially rebellious energy is expended in caring for others, she stresses that it is crucial for them so to do if they are to make any discernible progress: 'As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not to be the vessels of another woman's self-denial and frustration' (Rich, 1977: 247).

Rich's theory serves to illuminate the fatal sequence whereby 'la brodeuse' has not only inherited self-loathing from her own mother, but in identifying with Clytemnestra, incurs the risk of mentally colluding with her and perpetuating this defeatist cycle of repetition. Clytemnestra is the perfect embodiment of the maternal guilt syndrome. She has reaped no benefit from her crime and is effectually brainwashed with patriarchal ideals. She goes as far as to urge 'la brodeuse' not to try to alter history but to submit to the natural hierarchy and to embrace the subservient role allotted to her by patriarchal society:

La brodeuse, écoute-moi bien: lorsque tu unis ta vie à celle d'un homme avec lequel tu auras des enfants, tu ne dois jamais, quoi qu'il arrive, oublier le commencement de ton homme. [...] N'oublie jamais que ce commencement sera celui de ton fils et que ta fille aura à en être instruite. Il ne faut pas rompre la chaîne sinon tes enfants te tueront ou ils se tueront. C'est comme ça, c'est la nature de l'homme. (Cardinal, 1983: 314)

Interestingly, the queen's bleeding wound in her neck, which she continually nurses but refuses to discuss — 'Depuis toujours elle se comportait de telle sorte qu'il n'était pas question de parler de cette blessure, c'était son mystère, son jardin secret' (299) — can be paralleled with the narrator's vaginal bleeding in *Les Mots pour le dire*. There is no doubt that the bleeding which emerges as an obsessive aetiological pattern in both Cardinal's autobiographical and fictional works represents suppression of the rebellious self and denial of psychological conflict.

The witnessing of Clytemnestra's history by 'la brodeuse', combined with an analysis of her own family's past, forms part of the heroine's self-discovery and rebirth. She knows that her grandmother failed to adequately nurture her own mother, instructing her on the day of her marriage that sex was something to be endured rather than enjoyed (195). She is aware how unprepared her mother, Mimi, was for that brutal awakening to married life and how, later on when her daughter (the narrator's sister), Odette, died because of her husband's unwillingness to reveal he was a carrier of tuberculosis, Mimi did not adequately channel her anger but instead stored it up and transferred it to her own daughter. The seven years of psychotherapy that it took for Cardinal's narrator to come to terms with her mother's misdirected hatred are charted in *Les Mots pour le dire*. In *Le Passé empiété* Cardinal digs further and achieves a deeper insight into her mother and father's relationship through the literary reincarnation of her father. During this post-mortem she brings to the foreground the previously suppressed fantasies she had about him, and is eventually able to rebury him and better comprehend her mother's behaviour.

The punishment inflicted on 'la brodeuse' by her mother can be paralleled with the treatment of Gisèle Halimi by her mother, recounted in *La Cause des femmes*. Halimi's mother was compelled to conform to cultural and patriarchal norms and in order to justify her own oppression, she wished to see her daughter experience a similar destiny. This meaningless order and perpetual submission to tradition is questioned by Clytemnestra: 'Mais qui fabrique les mythes? Qui choisit, élague, ampute, nettoie l'Histoire? Qui décrète ce qui est important et ce qui ne l'est pas? Qui? Dis-le-moi!' (Cardinal, 1983: 251). History is shown to be a tool for validating male experience, which suppresses women's contribution to society. The queen's reflections have a cathartic effect on 'La brodeuse', enabling her to develop a deeper understanding of her own situation and that of the generations of women before her. The supernatural image of women moving around a dark volcanic crater is used to convey the idea that patriarchy is not only sinister but also deadly:

La p'tite Saintjean face à la vieille Saintjean, Clytemnestre face à moi, face à Mimi, Mimi face à nous, nous face à Iphigénie, identiques et ennemies. [...]  
Toutes sur la même terre, toutes engagées dans cette formidable aventure qu'est une vie de femme, toutes à tourner autour du cratère de l'homme-père. Bouche d'ombre. (Cardinal, 1983: 255)

The last reference evokes the full horror and mystery of the Hugolian poetic tradition. Face to face with her own history, 'la brodeuse' becomes conscious of the pattern forming in her family. However, she must listen to the endless recycling of Clytemnestra's story before she realises that in order to overcome her guilt she must break the cycle:

Et, dans le fond, elle me force à ouvrir grand la porte que j'ai découverte en racontant l'histoire de Jean-Maurice. [...] Maintenant les balivernes de Clytemnestre me replacent face à cette porte. Je vais l'emprunter. Je vais m'éloigner d'elle comme je me suis éloignée de lui. Je vais rompre avec moi, avec la femme que j'ai été.

Je n'ai plus essayé de m'identifier à elle, j'ai interprété ses histoires à ma manière et tant pis si ça ne lui plaît pas. (Cardinal, 1983: 315)

'La brodeuse' is rewriting these ancient male myths according to her own lights.

*Les Grands Désordres*, like *Le Passé empiété* is concerned with single motherhood and maternal responsibility, and deals with Elsa Labbé's three year battle to help her daughter, Laure, overcome an addiction to heroin. However, Elsa's real emotional difficulties commence not when she first discovers Laure is a drug-addict but paradoxically, only when Laure has actually recovered without the help of her mother. Elsa realises that her struggle to put 'order' in Laure's life has been fruitless and that her misguided approach has been counterproductive. She then has to cope with this self-appropriated stamp of failure.

Elsa Labbé's greatest fault is having set herself standards which are far too high. She is a widely respected psychologist who has pioneered research on entropy/disorder based on a law of thermodynamics. Only two things matter in her life; her work and above all, her daughter, Laure, and she feels a heightened sense of responsibility towards both. When her husband Jacques dies, Elsa acts swiftly to repair the temporary disorder in her own and her young daughter's lives. She leaves Aix-en-Provence and moves to Paris with Laure, taking a secretarial post so that she can study during the evenings to obtain her psychology qualifications. Determined that her daughter would not suffer due to the lack of a father, Elsa brings her up to be independent, just as her father would have wanted.

When she discovers that Laure is a heroin addict and in a possibly life-threatening situation, Elsa behaves in exactly the same way as before. She resolves once again to restore order, and although temporarily numbed with the shock, she responds to Laure's plea of desperation, 'Aide-moi!' (33) without asking for further explanations. She is ready to drop everything and take the car and leave Paris, sure that despite the gravity of the problem, it can and will be solved. Immediately her mind starts racing, she plans ahead, she thinks logically:

Alors, elle organise encore, elle range encore, elle nettoie encore. [...]

De cette manière minutieuse, systématique, presque académique, appliquée, mais curieuse, qui est la sienne, elle tâche de mettre à jour l'organisation des drogués qui vivaient ici. [...]

Elle va rentrer vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre heures dans le désordre de Laure. (Cardinal, 1987: 61-62)

Like the protagonist of *Le passé empiété*, Elsa abandons her work as soon as her child is threatened. Suddenly she is a full-time mother, no longer a psychologist. This

change of persona is more manifest since Elsa's story is relayed via a male narrator. In the opening paragraph of the novel the first impression of Elsa is filtered through a male gaze:

Elle portait un tailleur gris, strict, des bas noirs, un foulard rose et mauve noué autour du cou.

Quel âge? Entre quarante et cinquante ans.

Une grande femme blonde.

Elle bougeait et s'exprimait comme le font les gens qui jouissent d'une certaine notoriété. (Cardinal, 1987: 7)

This is a description of an elegantly dressed, confident, professional woman. From the point at which Laure enters the scene and lays claim to Elsa's full attention, however, there is no further reference to Elsa's attire, bearing or discourse. She becomes the stifling and devoted mother whose feelings and thoughts are centred on her daughter. 'La brodeuse' and Clytemnestra, simply because they have experienced childbirth, understand the indissoluble ties between mother and child: 'Pas besoin de parler, nous savons exactement les mêmes choses, nous savons comment dans un paroxysme de douleur nous avons vécu l'écartèlement de nos corps et senti s'épanouir en nous un bonheur fantastique' (Cardinal, 1983: 254). Likewise, Elsa is prepared to endure the necessary suffering involved in helping her daughter because she loves her so much: 'Elle doit choisir entre ses travaux et sa fille, entre elle-même et Laure; elle choisit Laure' (Cardinal, 1987: 62).

It is highly unlikely that a father would make the same sacrifices as Elsa, 'la brodeuse' and Clytemnestra. Elsa gave up her studies on an earlier occasion when she was pregnant with Laure, and now she is abandoning a career that has become her life. When she tells her friend François about Laure's problem he is insistent that she should not let her work suffer:

C'est triste, mais pense à toi. Il faut être brutale sinon tu vas mourir toi aussi. [...] Tu es nécessaire à beaucoup de gens, c'est ça qui compte. C'est seulement ça qui compte. Au congrès tout le monde a dit que ta communication était la plus importante de toutes. [...] Maintenant on attend de toi une publication et tu vas la faire, tu n'as rien d'autre à faire. (Cardinal, 1987: 68)

After this phone call to François she is deflated because it dawns upon her that there is a spiritual as well as a physical distance between them. Men fail to understand that mothers who work find it virtually impossible to keep career and family-life separate. Both are full-time jobs so one nearly always impinges on the other, although not necessarily in a negative way. Women's creative efforts at work or in their career are often enriched and modified by their experiences as women, wives and mothers. Elsa draws attention to this fact when she describes her early interest in Professor Greffier's research: 'J'ai découvert que le fait d'être une femme avait une importante incidence sur mon travail et mes convictions...' (Cardinal, 1987: 171).

However, because Laure now desperately needs her mother, Elsa knows that if she tried to continue working she would be continually distracted, and besides, the driving force for her work that was generated by a happy home life has now lost momentum. She dismisses her research as valueless because it cannot be brought to bear upon Laure's plight since it is not pertinent to drug addiction: 'Ma communication était académique, elle était plate. Elle était prétentieuse. [...] Ce que je fais c'est du scientisme, du vulgaire scientisme, j'ai un siècle de retard! (Cardinal, 1987: 69).

Since becoming a twenty-four hour mother, Elsa notices that colleagues no longer telephone her, only anxious mothers, as if only the mothers understand the pain of facing a child's imminent death:

Plus personne ne m'appelait au téléphone... à part certaines mères. Elles étaient dans le même état que moi. [...] A seulement entendre la voix, je savais que c'était une mère, une voix un peu craintive, s'excusant. [...] Il ne m'est arrivé que deux fois d'avoir des pères au bout du fil. (Cardinal, 1987: 167-168)

Despite having given up so much to help Laure, Elsa feels that she is never doing enough, that she is not devoting enough time to her daughter. Like 'la brodeuse' her guilt is irrational: she reproaches herself for having taken Laure to her father's funeral, for not having mourned her husband for longer, for having shown Laure Jacques' letters. In spite of her intellectual acuity, Elsa believes she merits punishment for pursuing her career and her independence with such vigour. However, Laure does not want a mother who falls apart, and her exigency that her mother be strong and capable no doubt contributes to Elsa's sense of failure: 'Elle ne supporte pas l'attention inquiète de sa mère. Ce n'est pas ça qu'elle est venue chercher. C'est la force d'Elsa, sa compétence qu'elle réclame' (Cardinal, 1987: 76). Similarly, the children of 'la brodeuse' feel aggrieved when she does not conform to their stifling notion of what a mother should be: 'Ma famille avec une obstination qui me mettait mal à l'aise, ne me sortait jamais du cadre qui aurait dû être le mien, celui d'une mère de famille ayant passé la quarantaine' (Cardinal, 1983: 40).

In addition to pressure from her daughter, Elsa is also haunted by Jacques and is very much afraid of being 'infidèle à son esprit' (Cardinal, 1987: 179). Although Jacques is not particularly chauvinistic, he appears to loosely represent patriarchal attitudes, as when Elsa feels she is infringing these expectations she immediately has the impression that she is betraying him:

Elle a peur de Jacques, du jugement de Jacques; elle ne peut pas lui rendre sa fille dans un état pareil... C'est une idée clandestine qui voyage à son bord, une idée



indigne, idiote. Elle n'en veut pas. Sa raison la repousse. Elle s'épuise à la rejeter. Mais elle ne peut pas la dépasser. (Cardinal, 1987: 97)

The idea that she is in conflict with the whole patriarchal system for having failed as a mother is driven home by the recurrent use of intimidating courtroom language:

Elle est là, bien carrée dans le siège, ses deux pieds à plat sur le tapis, légèrement séparés l'un de l'autre. Elle est en position d'être jugée. Elle se met au banc de l'accusée.

Elle se juge, elle s'accuse: «Je suis nulle. Elsa Labbé est une nullité, elle est incapable d'aider sa fille.» (Cardinal, 1987: 114)

Like all of Cardinal's characters, Elsa has to reach the nadir of despair before she can resolve her problem. She has to confront the past in order to understand that the order she strives to create and the impeccable standards she struggles to maintain serve as a compensation mechanism for the guilt inherent on being both a single mother and a working mother. At the same time, however, she objectively formulates her resentment of society's propensity to incriminate the mother:

La culpabilité des mères gâche la vie de tout le monde; la leur d'abord, celle de leurs enfants, de leurs hommes, et de leur entourage par-dessus le marché. [...]

Je trouve inadmissible qu'on mette sur le dos des mères la plupart des errements de nos sociétés... Les délinquants, les malades mentaux, les drogués, les alcooliques ont eu des mères trop ceci ou pas assez cela!... Les fautes des mères encombrent les journaux et les écrans de télévision. Les mères ne sont bonnes que lorsqu'elles sont annulées par leurs sacrifices... On ferait mieux d'essayer de comprendre comment de mères elles sont devenus mamans... (Cardinal, 1987: 190)

For the first time this cool and lucid *prise de conscience* represents a major critique of the Freudian legacy. Here we have the essential Cardinal-esque clash between intellect and instinct, between working woman and guilt-ridden mother. Both are halves of the same person and one cannot function without the other. The male narrator sums up Elsa's predicament succinctly when he says, 'Elle a parlé comme une personne qui plaide non coupable alors qu'elle n'est pas convaincue de son innocence' (189). Like the mothers of her patients, she is also entitled to an existence that does not revolve around being a mother and wife. She can see clearly that their guilt is undeserved, but has difficulty applying the same logic to her life: 'J'ai toujours cherché à déculpabiliser les mères des enfants que je traitais. Les mères ont le droit d'avoir une vie!' (Cardinal, 1987: 191). Elsa must accept that life cannot always run smoothly and logically, that a certain amount of disorder is necessary:

Depuis le jour où j'ai été seule avec elle, j'ai pris mon désordre pour notre pire ennemi, j'ai tout fait pour en protéger ma fille... j'étais dans la cuisine, face à ce tas, je me confrontais aux vingt années de mon ordre, de mes règles, de ma discipline, des choix que j'avais faits et auxquels je m'étais tenue avec une rigueur extrême. [...] C'est alors que vous avez mis le magnétophone sur ma table de nuit... L'idée m'est venue de parler au tas dans la cuisine, de me parler. Cet amoncellement c'était moi, c'était mon désordre, c'était ce qu'il y avait de meilleur en moi. (Cardinal, 1987: 243)

During the course of this psychoanalysis, it is apparent that Elsa has once again become a woman, not just a mother. She has rediscovered her identity and her sexuality and, at the end of the novel, the change in narrative tone marks a stylistic release: 'Elle vient vers moi ma blonde. [...] Il n'existe pas de femme plus belle qu'elle. Elle est encore plus belle que dans ma tête. Elle est magnifique. Elle est l'amour en marche cette femme' (Cardinal, 1987: 238).

The work/family conflict that is the principal theme of these two novels is even woven into the titles of the texts. *Le Passé empiété* is not only a favourite embroidery stitch of 'la brodeuse' but the expression also subsumes the conviction that she must go back over her family past in order to move forward:

Le passé empiété est un point facile à exécuter. Il suffit d'enjamber un espace plus ou moins grand du tissu à broder par un trait de soie, de coton, de laine ou de ce que l'on veut, puis on revient sous ce point afin de lancer le point suivant plus loin, et ainsi de suite: on empiète dans le passé pour se lancer dans l'avenir. Le passé empiété. (Cardinal, 1983: 235)

Similarly, the title of *Les Grands Désordres* can be interpreted in two ways. It represents the upheaval of normal family life that is caused by heroin addiction, and it also refers to Elsa's research on entropy and her personal battle against disorder followed by her eventual truce with it.

Cardinal's rewriting of classical myth in *Le Passé empiété*, and her evocation of the horror of drug addiction — a grim, modern-day reality — in *Les Grands Désordres*, illustrate the timeless quality of Cardinal's themes. The problems encountered by creative or working mothers, whether married, widowed or separated have not been confined to one particular era: they recur like an unwelcome leitmotif each decade. Single mothers and redundant or absentee fathers are by no means an affliction of the late twentieth century, and no doubt the themes of these two novels will continue to be relevant as we move into the next. The recent backlash against single mothers and working women confirms that women are still made scapegoats for society's ills.

Ultimately, both of Cardinal's protagonists succeed in coming to terms with their perceived guilt via a process of prolonged and searing self-analysis. At the end of the novels, 'la brodeuse' and Elsa Labbé unceremoniously reject not only the cultural tendency to blame mothers for all society's ills, but also the social constraints that boxed them into unrealistic and impractical maternal roles. Their advocacy of women's right to be both creatively dynamic and emotionally fulfilled makes of them positive and progressive feminist role models.

## **CONCLUSION**

My thesis is that it is not legitimate to study representations of working women in contemporary literature without taking a narrower look at their status in society, their role within the family unit, and the manner in which girls and women are conditioned in the home, at school, and by advertisers and the media. Limited awareness of the wider social context hampers understanding of the reasons why girls opt for traditionally 'feminine' subjects at school, why women sacrifice further education or their careers in order to focus on their families, why a sexual division of labour still prevails within the home and why working women are concentrated in occupational ghettos. As Artinian and Boccara incisively point out, such detailed contextualisation would not be necessary if we were dealing with representations of men at work:

Se pencher sur le travail des femmes, c'est aussi parler de la famille et de la société en général. En revanche, étudier le travail des hommes ne nécessite jamais de faire référence à leur statut matrimonial, à la taille de leur famille, ni même à l'activité de leur femme. (Artinian and Boccara, 1992: 6-7)

The fundamental preoccupation of the modern feminist movement in France, in common with other women's movements across the globe, has been the struggle to improve women's lives in both the public and the private domains. Fairer division of labour within the home, economic independence and voluntary maternity have been the principal feminist demands during this battle for equality. As I have already shown, the availability of contraceptive services and the legalisation of abortion combined with important changes in

employment legislation have helped ease women's integration into the labour market. Nonetheless, equality before the law does not translate into full social equality, and what nearly all our fictional and non-fictional texts illustrate, is that, in spite of these concrete gains, inequalities between men and women persist, with the result that the majority of working women are not only confined within female-dominated occupational sectors but must endure the harsh conditions and low pay associated with these jobs. Beauvoir's admission that 'le travail n'est pas une panacée' is depressingly borne out by the wretchedness of our heroines' working conditions. The work environment is shown to be designed for the male worker whose wife stays at home to take care of children and household chores. And yet, as Beauvoir makes plain, when women do not earn their own living, they are eternally dependent on others. Like Monique, Céline and Suzanne in our novels, full-time housewives are forced into a parasitical relationship with their partners. However, while those who seek paid work may achieve a degree of financial autonomy, this work is by no means fulfilling. Elise, Maryvonne and Loïca are doubly exploited: firstly, because of their social class and secondly, because they are women. The oppression they face at home is reinforced at work where they are assigned monotonous tasks. If it were not for financial exigencies, many women would prefer to remain at home full-time rather than work a double shift. The paradox that work both liberates and subjugates holds true for nearly all of the protagonists.

Education and upbringing are crucial factors in women's secondary status in the workplace. Even though the texts I have focused on differ widely in their cultural and social settings, educators and parents of all classes are shown to encourage girls to put family responsibilities first, and a career second, thereby recreating the venerable religious traditions of female subjugation. We have seen that the value girls place on their educational attainment is adversely affected by this indoctrination. The heroine of Rochefort's *Les Petits enfants du siècle*, Josyane, fails to see the relevance of education. Indeed, how pertinent are academic studies when realistically one's future is to get married, remain at home and have children? Those feminist theorists who have played an active part in the domestic

labour debate, for example, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Ann Oakley, Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig, point out that the smooth functioning of patriarchal society relies on women staying at home to provide domestic services without pay. Sadly, it would seem that the impact of this ethos, combined with the lack of encouragement at school and the absence of role models, leads to a degree of *mauvaise foi* on the part of several of our heroines, who find it easier to act out the roles allotted to them by society than to query them.

Yet French society is evolving where education is concerned. The student demonstrations in Paris in 1998 during which high school students protested about educational cuts, staff shortages and class sizes demonstrate that today female students are more politicised. The headline in *Le Figaro* — ‘Les filles mènent la danse’ — highlighted the astonishing number of female students who took the lead during the protest. It would seem that young French women are not only more prepared than their male counterparts to voice their dissatisfaction, but they clearly attach considerably more importance to the value of education than the protagonists of my chosen texts. A sociologist who was questioned about this gender division downplayed the large female presence at the demonstration: ‘C’est finalement un phénomène très banal. A âge égal, les filles sont considérées dans les établissements scolaires comme des interlocutrices plus mûres, plus responsables, moins infantiles que les garçons, les garçons plus préoccupés par l’image de soi, et leur virilité’ (Etienne, 1998).

## EVOLUTION: THE OLD AND THE NEW PROTAGONISTS

Also on the positive side, we witness a certain progression from some of the earlier writers. Etcherelli’s heroines, Elise, Clémence and Milie, initially connive in their own oppression, and their self-awareness comes too late to be life-enhancing. In Letessier’s novels, however, the protagonists are unionised, assertive, and in Loïca’s case, fiercely independent. Even more inspirational are two relatively recent novels by Ernaux and

Emmanuèle Bernheim. In *Passion simple* and *Sa femme*, the protagonists are sexually but not financially dependent on men, which is much more liberating. Both heroines rejoice in their sexuality. Guilt at adultery does not impinge on their hedonistic *jouissance*. This marks a significant step forward even from Letessier's novels in which the heroines are forced to endure distasteful and undesired sexual experiences.<sup>1</sup> Bernheim's protagonist is a doctor and work is represented as a natural part of her day. She exudes job satisfaction, and moves easily between three partners. Quite untroubled by any Catholic sense of guilt about her sexuality, she exploits her medical expertise to enhance her sensual pleasure. Similarly, at the end of Ernaux's novel, when the heroine has learnt to measure time not by chores but 'autrement, de tout mon corps' (Ernaux, 1991: 76), the female protagonist positively vaunts the felicities of her adulterous liaison:

Quand j'étais enfant, le luxe, c'était pour moi les manteaux de fourrure, les robes longues et les villas au bord de la mer. Plus tard, j'ai cru que c'était de mener une vie d'intellectuel. Il me semble maintenant que c'est aussi de pouvoir vivre une passion pour un homme ou une femme. (Ernaux, 1991: 77)

These two texts may indicate that we are in the process of realising a society of the twenty-first century. In their study, *Hommes/femmes: l'introuvable égalité*, Bihr and Pfefferkorn (1996: 287) suggest that a society free from sexual and class divisions would be 'une société dans laquelle chaque individu pourrait travailler à sa propre identité personnelle et existentielle comme à une œuvre permanente et personnelle, la modifiant et l'enrichissant sans cesse, loin de toute inscription dans un quelconque modèle réducteur.'

The discourse of our most recent texts shows a break with the language of penitence and self-recrimination that was such a marked feature of the earlier novels. In

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<sup>1</sup>See *Le Voyage à Paimpol* (Letessier, 1980: 70) and *Loïca* (Letessier, 1983: 97).



these, the protagonists were held back by the rigours of Catholic constraints on the free expression of their sexuality. Cardinal voiced a heartfelt protestation:

Nous vivons dans l'hypocrisie. [...] Dans la face cachée des mots liberté, sécurité, santé, amour, égalité, on n'ose pas dire que fermente et s'envenime ce qui fait la vie des femmes: la double journée, les bas salaires, le viol, l'exigence de la jeunesse et de la beauté, l'infériorité, la gratuité des services, la disponibilité, l'abandon de la créativité, la demi-retraite. Tout cela ne s'appelle pas ainsi, tout cela s'appelle: le plus beau rôle de la vie, le bonheur d'être mère, la chance d'être entretenue, l'honorable mention  
«sans profession», etc. (Cardinal, 1977a: 11)

As Cardinal's irony so deftly illustrates, language can be used and frequently has been used to oppress women. However, the most modern French women writers have reclaimed language in order to validate their experiences, to reshape their historical situation, to put issues that concern them on the agenda, to reclaim what were once taboo areas of the female body, to rewrite women's history, to share their formative experiences with their sisters, and to empathise across social barriers.

The authors I chose to examine have been grouped not simply because they are women, or because they are writing in the post-war period, or because some of them consciously adopt a 'feminine' style of writing, but because, as Elaine Showalter points out, they inherit a common history of oppression:

Women do have a special history susceptible to analysis, which includes such complex considerations as the economics of their relation to the literary marketplace; the effects of social and political changes in women's status upon individuals, and

the implications of stereotypes of the woman writer and restrictions of her artistic autonomy. (Moi, 1985: 50)

Like Showalter, Christine Delphy always claimed that women constituted one class in that they had their oppression in common with one another. Despite the fact that we may find it frustrating that women writers are often only included in college and university curriculums in the apologetic guise of a gender studies course, grouping together writers because of their sex represents a valid, because eminently pragmatic approach to literary criticism, particularly in arts departments where the overwhelming majority of students are female. The evolution of viewpoint in our selection of texts encourages us to celebrate difference and recognise the distinctive identity as well as the diversity of women's writing.

'A man's book is a book. A woman's book is a woman's book' asserted Rochefort in an incisive speech at the University of Wisconsin.<sup>2</sup> The words are a reminder of the discrimination suffered by women when they attempt to be taken seriously as writers. However, Rochefort points out during the same speech that there is sometimes an advantage in being classified apart, even if it is bittersweet. She asserts that if her novel *Le Repos du guerrier* (1958) had been written by a man, the sexual content would not have seemed quite so shocking and consequently, it would not have been such a bestseller:

There are sometimes good sides to oppression. But it took time for me to recover, and come up with the correct analysis: I was a woman, so emphasis was put in the smallest sexual issues appearing in my writings. [...] In brief, we are read below the belt — men are at the glorious level of brain.

Women have a social, political and economic history that is not only gender specific but vastly under-reported, and to concentrate on women writers is to revive and give voice to

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<sup>2</sup>See Marks and Courtivron (eds.), 1981: 183-186. This speech was written and delivered in English by Christiane Rochefort.

experiences that have been marginalised and condemned to secondariness and worst of all, inadequately recorded by male writers. 'Has literature a sex?' asks Rochefort, 'With dignity, I, and most of my sisters, we would answer: No. But. But. But, do we have the same experience [as men]? Do we have the same mental structures? The same obsessions? [...] After all, we don't belong to the same civilization.' Focusing on women only permits us to redress the balance in some way and allow histories and existences that were previously silenced to be heard. In France especially, considerable progress has been and is being made in advancing the claims of women for full equal, social, literary and even political representation. In May 2000, parity was inscribed in the French constitution, a world first. Our optimism may be further contextualised by the findings of a powerful 1997 analysis of representative working women in modern France, *Femmes en tête* which returns a resoundingly optimistic answer to the fundamental question of whether work truly is the key to women's emancipation:

Toutes générations confondues, ces femmes, à de rares exceptions près, ont relevé un défi longtemps présenté comme impossible — celui de combiner carrière et vie privée. Or, la centaine de femmes interrogées ne regrettent aucun des choix qu'elles ont fait. Elles ont atteint un équilibre dont la qualité n'est pas gâchée par la difficulté du parcours. Toutes parlent du plaisir de travailler. Aucune ne prétend jouer le rôle de cette «superwoman» dont on a cherché, ces dernières années, à faire un modèle en même temps qu'un repoussoir. Tout en dédramatisant l'antique antinomie entre maternité et vie professionnelle, elles ont su trouver l'énergie et l'ingéniosité nécessaires pour faire en sorte que ni leur employeur ni leur famille ne soient lésés.

(Barret-Ducrocq et Pisier, 1997: 427)

Barret-Ducrocq and Pisier's impressive marshalling of the achievements of French women currently in power finds a literary parallel in the eloquent testimonies of Ernaux and

Bernheim, whose protagonists are able to run their professional and emotional lives in tandem, and to realise their sexuality to the full.

## **APPENDIX**

### **WOMEN IN FRANCE**

- 1920** Law prohibits abortion and outlaws information about, and provision of, contraception.
- 1939** *Le Code de la famille* is established to promote family values.
- 1943** Marie-Louise Giraud, an abortionist, is executed by guillotine.
- 1944** Women are granted the right to vote by De Gaulle on 21 April.  
Elsa Triolet is the first woman to be awarded the *Prix Goncourt* since its establishment in 1903.
- 1945** Women are entitled to maternity leave of eight weeks with 50% pay.
- 1946** Constitution recognises that men and women have equal rights in most domains.
- 1949** Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*.
- 1950** Law establishing *La Fête des Mères*.

- 1951** Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*.
- 1954** Simone de Beauvoir is awarded the *Prix Goncourt* for *Les Mandarins*.  
Start of the Algerian War.
- 1956** Dr Marie-Andrée Lagroua Weill-Hallé founds *Maternité Heureuse* which in 1958 becomes *Le Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial*.
- 1958** Beauvoir, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*.
- 1960** Gisèle Halimi defends a young Algerian girl, Djamila Boupacha, tortured because of her suspected involvement in the planting of a bomb in Algiers.
- 1961** Christiane Rochefort is awarded the *Prix du roman populiste* for *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*.  
Rochefort, *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*.
- 1962** War in Algeria ends.  
Marie Cardinal receives the *Prix International du Premier Roman* for *Ecoutez la mer*.
- 1963** Rochefort, *Les Stances à Sophie*.
- 1965** The most anachronistic aspects of the Napoleonic Code are revoked: a married woman can open a bank account without her husband's permission and a husband can no longer prevent his wife from working.

- 1966** Maternity leave of fourteen weeks authorised. Beauvoir, *Les Belles Images*. Brégeon, *Une journée inutile*.
- 1967** Loi Neuwirth legalises the sale of contraceptives. Beauvoir, *La Femme rompue*. Etcherelli, *Élise ou la vraie vie*. Etcherelli receives the *Prix Fémina* for *Élise ou la vraie vie*.
- 1968** Mass strikes in France led by workers and students.
- 1970** The *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (name given by the press to militant women's groups) is born. In August, several women including Wittig and Rochefort place a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier dedicated to the unknown wife of the soldier. Law replaces 'paternal authority' with 'parental authority'.
- 1971** In April *Le Nouvel Observateur* publishes *Le Manifeste des 343*, a manifesto signed by 343 women, including Beauvoir, Rochefort and Halimi, stating that they have had illegal abortions. Etcherelli, *A propos de Clémence*. *Choisir* is formed to defend the signatories of the manifesto. Halimi is one of the presidents of *Choisir*. *Le Torchon brûle*, radical feminist paper, is published.
- 1972** At the Bobigny trial Halimi defends four women charged with arranging an illegal abortion for the daughter of one of them. Equal pay legislation is introduced.

- 1973**     *Le Mouvement pour la Liberté de l'Avortement et pour la Contraception (M.L.A.C.)* is established.  
The *des femmes* publishing project is founded, selling and publishing only works written by women.     Halimi, *La Cause des femmes*.
- 1974**     Contraception costs are reimbursed by the French Social Security.     Leclerc, *Parole de femme*.
- 1975**     Loi Simone Veil makes abortion legal. Law forbids employers to discriminate against candidates on the grounds of sex. Divorce by mutual consent allowed.     Cardinal, *Les Mots pour le dire*.
- 1976**     Prostitutes strike.  
Marie Cardinal is awarded the *Prix Littré* for *Les Mots pour le dire*.
- 1977**     Publication of the journal *Questions féministes*, edited by Beauvoir.     Cardinal, *Autrement dit*.
- 1978**     Etcherelli, *Un arbre voyageur*.
- 1980**     Law forbids the dismissal of pregnant women.  
Women are granted maternity leave of 16 weeks with 70% pay.     Letessier, *Le Voyage à Paimpol*.
- 1981**     Marguerite Yourcenar becomes the first woman member of the *Académie Française*.     Ernaux, *La Femme gelée*.
- 1982**     Loi Roudy allows women to claim back 80 per cent of the costs of an abortion from the French Social Security.



1983	Law provides for equal opportunities at work for men and women.	Cardinal, <i>Le Passé empiété</i> . Letessier, <i>Loïca</i> .
1984	Ernaux wins the <i>Prix Renaudot</i> for <i>La Place</i> .	
1985	Law recognises the equal rights of a married couple where the management of their property is concerned.	
1987		Cardinal, <i>Les Grands Désordres</i> . Fitoussi, <i>Le Ras-le-bol des superwomen</i> . Bernheim, <i>Un couple</i> .
1988	<i>Prix Médicis</i> awarded to Rochefort for <i>La Porte du fond</i> .	Halimi, <i>Le Lait de l'oranger</i> .
1990	Rape within marriage is condemned.	
1991	Edith Cresson becomes first female Prime Minister.	Ernaux, <i>Passion simple</i> .
1992	Domestic violence punishable by law. Sexual harassment becomes a recognisable offence.	
1993	<i>Prix Médicis</i> is awarded to Bernheim for <i>Sa femme</i> . Law makes it an offence to hinder someone seeking a legal abortion.	Bernheim, <i>Sa femme</i> . Ernaux, <i>Journal du dehors</i> .
1997		Halimi, <i>La Nouvelle Cause des femmes</i> .
1998		Bernheim, <i>Vendredi soir</i>

**2000** May, Law on parity makes it obligatory to put forward equal numbers of men and women on candidate lists.

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